



# MLA Style Quick Study

An Introduction to Modern Language Association Style by Dr Abel Scribe PhD - Fall 2010

The **MLA Quick Study** is a concise guide to the basic features and essential rules of Modern Language Association (MLA) style. Based on the current sixth edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (2003), it is a companion guide to the *MLA Style Sheet*. While the *Style Sheet* focuses on the details, the *Quick Study* highlights those features that are trademarks of MLA style.

## MLA QUICK STUDY CONTENTS

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### I. Documentation

A research paper threads its way into a dialogue among scholars. If the documentation is poor or incomplete this dialogue sputters and fails, becoming little more than noise. You must get this right.

### II. Page Formatting

MLA style has a distinctive title page and a simple set of rules to go with it. But this is not the way the style is applied in print, by the MLA's own journal! If you are required to mimic the *MLA Handbook* one format is required; for clarity and a polished appearance use the other.

### III. MLA Text Rules

MLA style merges into common English usage. But what is unique to MLA style, and what is common usage? There are five sets of rules that merit special attention. These cover MLA style: (1) abbreviations, (2) capitalization, (3) emphasis, (4) numbers, and (5) quotations.

## INTRODUCTION

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**MLA style**, as its name suggests, is widely used in the fields of modern literature. There are features of the style that make it especially suited for this use, especially for the sophisticated presentation of quotations and citations to literary works. However, it is (mostly) a very easy style to use, and a very easy style for most readers to interpret, even readers unfamiliar with the nuances of scholarly discourse. This makes it a good general purpose style to use when no style is specified.

The *MLA Handbook* is a bit sparse when it comes to describing page formatting, and leaves out completely features found in the MLA's own journal. Beyond these shortcomings it is a good investment if this is your field. With the book you also get the password to the MLA website.

**Style has two meanings.** It can refer to a style of *expression*, as for example, a story in the style of Ernest Hemingway. It can also refer to a style of *presentation*, as in the style of the Modern Language Association. This is the focus of the *MLA Handbook*, and the *MLA Quick Study*.

## I. DOCUMENTATION

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**There are three basic styles** of references: (1) author-date, (2) bibliography, and (3) note, in the form of endnotes and footnotes. MLA style uses the bibliography style, with text citations placed in parentheses (*parenthetical citations*) in author-page format. References and citations must correspond, that is, everything cited in the text must be referenced, and only the works cited are included in the reference list. MLA style offers a reminder of this correspondence by placing the reference list under the heading *Works Cited*.

 **The key question is: "Can the reader find the work cited?"**

**References are composed of elements.** These are: author, title, publication information, and Internet access information. Each element is followed by a period. MLA style follows these rules:

- **Authors.** The *Works Cited* are organized alphabetically by author. Therefore, the lead author's name goes last name first. All other names follow in their normal order, following conventional usage for the conjunction *and*, and punctuation.
- **Titles (Parts).** Articles and chapters are parts of works or volumes. Titles of parts of works are capitalized (heading caps) and placed in quotes: "The Title of a Journal Article."
- **Titles (Volumes).** Titles of books or the names of journals are capitalized (heading caps) and underlined or placed in italics: The Title of a Book or Journal, *The Name of a Journal or Title of a Book*.
- **Publication Information (Books).** MLA style, like other styles, introduces the publisher of a standalone volume (but not a journal) by first giving the place of publication, then the name of the publisher, followed by the year, New York: Artless Press.

- *Publication Information (Periodicals)*. By convention (shared with other styles) no publisher is given for journals and other periodicals, the title or name of the journal is sufficient. This is followed by the publication information in the form: volume (date): page.
- *Internet access*. The date a sources is accessed is followed by the URL (uniform resource locator) enclosed in angle brackets, for example, 1 Apr. 2006 <http://www.docstyles.com>.

**Example.** The basic elements are found in a reference to a chapter in an anthology.

Watts, Alan. "The Art of Contemplation." Cloud-Hidden, Whereabouts Unknown: A Mountain Journal. New York: Vintage Books, 1974. 179-96. Print.

**Example.** An article in an online journal illustrates the elements in a reference to a periodical.

Barry, John M. "The Site of Origin of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic and Its Public Health Implications." Commentary. Journal of Translational Medicine 2.3 (20 Jan. 2004): 1-4. Web. 18 Nov. 2005 <http://www.translational-medicine.com/content/2/1/3>.

### MLA Rules

- *Full Dates*. Use international format--day month year. Abbreviate the month (Jan., Feb., Mar., Apr., May, June, July, Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov., Dec.).
- *Heading Caps*. Each word in a title is capitalized, except for articles (*a, an, the*), prepositions (*against, between, in, of, to*), conjunctions (*and, but, for, nor, or, so, yet*), and the infinitive *to*. This form of capitalization is used for headings and subheadings in many styles, and traditionally in newspapers where the term originated.
- *Punctuation*. Elements are followed by periods.
- *Underline or Italics?* Volume titles and journal names have traditionally been underlined in MLA style, but italics are perfectly acceptable. Be consistent.
- *Volume.Number*. Journals are published in volumes. Most journals number pages consecutively through the volume, each new issue picking up where the last left off. But many do not. References to these journals note the number in the volume in the form: volume.number.

### Block Formats

The block formats illustrate how references to various sources are composed. Additional information, such as the edition of a book (when other than the first) may be needed for some references.

<i>Book:</i>	Author, First Middle. <u>The Title of the Book or Volume</u> . Xth ed. Trans. First M. Last. City: Publisher, 2006. Print.
<i>Chapter:</i>	Author, First Middle, and First M. Coauthor. "Title of the Chapter." <u>Title of the Volume</u> . Ed. First M. Last. City: Publisher, 2006. 123-56. Print.
<i>Journal:</i>	Author, First M., First M. Coauthor, and Second M. Coauthor. "Title of the Journal Article." <u>Journal Name</u> 10.3 (2006): 123-56. Print.
<i>Newspaper:</i>	Author, First Middle. "Title of the Newspaper Article." <u>Name of the Newspaper</u> 1 Apr. 2006: 123-56. Print.
<i>Online</i>	Author, First M. "Title of the Journal Article." <u>Journal Name</u> 10.3 (2006): 123-56. Web. 1 Apr. 2010. <The Complete URL>.

### Abbreviations

MLA style has a passion for abbreviations in references, even devotes a chapter to the topic in the Handbook. Many journals ignore this feature. For example, *U of Chicago P* stands for *University of Chicago Press*.

### Medium

MLA style has found the need to include the medium of publication in every reference, that is, you must indicate if the source is a Print document or a Web page, PDF File, Audiocassette, Videocassette, Performance, Oil on canvas, Digital image, Tweet, or Whatever..

### Text Citations

Ideas and direct quotes are cited in the text using parenthetical citations in the form: (Author page). The author or authors are cited by last name followed by the page if relevant or for a direct quote. For example, (Booth, Colomb, and Williams 123). There is no comma before the page number.

MLA style also uses a special or traditional citation for literary works. For example, the following passage is from the *Merchant of Venice* (MV). Shylock is speaking: "I'll have my bond; speak not against my bond; I have sworn an oath that I will have my bond. . . ." MLA cites this (MV 3.3). Conventional notation might cite this (*Merchant of Venice*, act III, sc. iii). Be consistent.

**II. PAGE FORMAT**

**Will the real the real MLA style please come forward?** Most styles publish what they preach. Not MLA. The page format featured in the *MLA Handbook* has a distinctly rough draft student-learner look to it. A more professional appearance is found in the MLA's own journal, *PMLA*. There are three basic differences: (1) the *MLA Handbook* does not allow the use of headings and subheadings in papers, (2) the *Handbook* requires everything to be double-spaced when *block paragraph spacing* for block quotes, headings, and references is more appropriate, and (3) block quotes require a *double indent*, indented a full inch from the left margin instead of a half inch.

<p><b>PMLA Presentation Format</b> Lastname 1</p> <p>First M. Lastname                  Professor Adams                  Humanities 101                  1 April 2005</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Centered Title in Heading Caps</b></p> <p>The MLA page format may be extended to reflect journal practices and common conventions. These include the use of headings, single spacing within block quotes and references, and indenting block quotes just one-half inch rather than specified one inch.</p> <p><b>First Level Heading</b></p> <p>The first paragraph after a heading or subheading is <i>not indented</i>. Subsequent paragraphs are indented one-half inch. Block quotes are required when the quote exceeds four lines, indented one-half inch from the left margin.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but to so love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. (Thoreau, <i>Walden</i> ch. 5, 15)</p> <p><b>Second level heading.</b> This is often called a <i>run-in</i> or <i>paragraph</i> heading. This is one of several heading styles used by the journal <i>PMLA</i>. The subheading may be set in italics or a bold font, or both. Be consistent!</p> <p>Margins are one inch around the page.</p>	<p><b>MLA Handbook Format</b> Lastname 1</p> <p>First M. Lastname                  Professor Adams                  Humanities 101                  1 April 2005</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Centered Title in Heading Caps</p> <p>Margins are one inch around the page; double space all text including quotes and headings. The <u>MLA Handbook</u> makes no provision for section headings or subheadings. It argues that many fields prefer not to use subheadings, and offers no instructions for doing so. However, the MLA's own journal, <u>PMLA</u>, often uses headings and subheadings in published papers, one style is shown on the other page.</p> <p>Block quotes are required when the quote exceeds four lines--indented <u>one inch</u> from the left margin.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but to so love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. (Thoreau, <u>Walden</u> ch. 5, 15)</p> <p>Indent paragraphs one-half inch. Do not right justify the text. Hyphenated words can obscure meanings. The <u>MLA Handbook</u> prefers underlining to italics, just be consistent.</p> <p>Make all notes endnotes.</p>
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**Easy to Read?** The goal of any research style is clarity of communication. "Effective writing depends as much on clarity and readability as on content" (MLA 49).


- *Page numbers* are required on every page. The page header is the author's last name. These go inside the margin space, one-half inch from the top of the page, next to the right margin.
- *Margins.* One inch margins are required on all four sides of a page. This applies to all pages, and the contents of all pages, but excludes the page number/header.
- *Justification?* "Do not justify the lines of text at the right margin; turn off your word processor's automatic hyphenation feature" (MLA 116). Hyphens introduced to break words and wrap lines can confuse a reader.
- *Double-space lines throughout the text!* Space twice after punctuation at the ends of sentences; space once after colons.
- *Dates* may follow US format (e.g., April 1, 2009) or universal format (1 April 2009). The *Handbook* gives you the choice, but be consistent, including references. The preference is for the universal format.
- *Indents.* Indent paragraphs one-half inch, except block quotes. Indent block quotes one inch. There are special rules for indenting block quotes that run beyond a single paragraph (see Section 3.4).
- *Block quotes* are required when a quote exceeds four lines in your paper. Indent the quote one inch, paragraphs in block quotes a quarter-inch more.

**Headings/Subheadings**

The MLA *Handbook* offers no instructions for headings, claiming they are not needed, although authors publishing in the MLA journal, *PMLA*, employ them in about half the articles. The descriptive style is shown above. Also used are roman numerals in brackets: [I], [II], [III], [IV], and so forth.

Block paragraph spacing single-spaces within blocks of text, but double spaces before and after the block. This is especially appropriate for references, block quotes, and headings. The two styles are shown below.

<p><b>PMLA Presentation Format</b> Lastname 12</p> <p><b>Works Cited</b></p> <p>Anaya, Rodolfo, and Francisco Lomeli, eds. <i>Aztlan: Essays on the Chicano Homeland</i>. Albuquerque: Academia-El Norte, 1989. Print</p> <p>Braudel, F. <i>The Perspective of the World</i>. Volume III of <i>Civilization and Capitalism 15th–18th Century</i>. Trans. S. Reynolds. New York: Harper, 1984. Print.</p> <p>Camhi, Leslie. "Art of the City." Rev. of <i>New York Modern: The Arts and the City</i>, by William B. Scott, and Peter M. Rutkoff. <i>Village Voice</i> 15 June 1999: 154. Print.</p> <p>French, R. M., trans. <i>The Way of a Pilgrim and The Pilgrim Continues His Way</i>. New York: Ballantine-Random House, 1974. Print.</p> <p>Gamson, William A., Bruce Fireman, and Steven Rytina. <i>Encounters with Unjust Authority</i>. Homewood, IL: Dorsey, 1982. Print.</p> <p>Jonsson, Patrick. "A Bill of Rights, Looted Long Ago, is Stolen Back." <i>The Christian Science Monitor</i> 22 Apr. 2003. Web. 27 Apr. 2003 &lt;<a href="http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0422/p01s01-usgn.htm">http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0422/p01s01-usgn.htm</a>&gt;.</p> <p>Whitman, Walt. "Song of the Open Road." <i>Complete Poetry and Selected Prose</i>. 1891–92. Ed. James E. Miller, Jr. Boston: Houghton, 1959. 108–115. Print.</p>	<p><b>MLA Handbook Format</b> Lastname 12</p> <p><b>Works Cited</b></p> <p>Anaya, Rodolfo, and Francisco Lomeli, eds. <u><i>Aztlan: Essays on the Chicano Homeland</i></u>. Albuquerque: Academia-El Norte, 1989. Print.</p> <p>Braudel, F. <u><i>The Perspective of the World</i></u>. Volume III of <u><i>Civilization and Capitalism 15th–18th Century</i></u>. Trans. S. Reynolds. New York: Harper, 1984. Print.</p> <p>Camhi, Leslie. "Art of the City." Rev. of <i>New York Modern: The Arts and the City</i>, by William B. Scott, and Peter M. Rutkoff. <u><i>Village Voice</i></u> 15 June 1999: 154. Print.</p> <p>French, R. M., trans. <u><i>The Way of a Pilgrim and The Pilgrim Continues His Way</i></u>. New York: Ballantine-Random House, 1974. Print.</p> <p>Gamson, William A., Bruce Fireman, and Steven Rytina. <u><i>Encounters with Unjust Authority</i></u>. Homewood, IL: Dorsey, 1982. Print.</p> <p>Jonsson, Patrick. "A Bill of Rights, Looted Long Ago, is Stolen Back." <u><i>The Christian Science Monitor</i></u> 22 Apr. 2003. Web. 27 Apr. 2003 &lt;<a href="http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0422/p01s01-usgn.htm">http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0422/p01s01-usgn.htm</a>&gt;.</p> <p>Whitman, Walt. "Song of the Open Road." <u><i>Complete Poetry and Selected Prose</i></u>. 1891–92. Ed. James E. Miller, Jr. Boston: Houghton, 1959. 108–115. Print.</p>
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 It is probably prudent to use the *Handbook* format in introductory courses. Advanced students may prefer to present their work in the more polished *PMLA* format.

**III. MLA TEXT RULES**

**The English language** is not always clear on presentation. Research styles have developed their own rules in some areas as a consequence. These are often embedded with a style guide’s discussion of the more conventional rules of English usage. You have to study the familiar to ferret out what is unique to the style. There are five topics that merit special attention: some shared by other styles, some unique to MLA style.

**Abbreviations**

There are two rules to note: (1) define acronyms, and (2) never use lowercase or Latin abbreviations in plain text.

*Acronyms* are letters representing words.

- Technically the abbreviation *MLA* is an *initialism* since each letter is pronounced separately, while *NASA* is a true acronym since it is pronounced as a word. Acronyms must be defined the first time they are used. For example, the Modern Language Association (MLA) produces its own style guide. This can also be written, “the MLA (Modern Language Association) produces a *Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*.”
- Acronyms should be used sparingly. Unless they are very familiar, like FBI or CIA, a reader can remember just a few in the course of a research paper. If many pages come between the first usage and subsequent usage, the reader can forget what the acronym stands for. It is prudent to give the full term and repeat the acronym a second time. The goal is to achieve clarity for the reader.

Lowercase abbreviations, and especially Latin abbreviations, are never used in a text.

- Latin abbreviations common in scholarly discourse include *et al.* (*et alii*, and others), *e.g.* (*exempli gratia*, for example), *etc.* (*et cetera*, and so forth), *i.e.* (*id est*, that is), and *N.B.* (*nota bene*, take careful note). These may be used only in references or inside parentheses in the text (e.g., like this). Otherwise, write out the English equivalent, for example, like this.
- The *MLA Handbook* devotes an entire short chapter to the artistry of abbreviation (chap. 7). Advanced students should study this.

### Capitalization

MLA style has its own rules for capitalizing headings and titles. “The rules for capitalizing titles are strict. In a title or a subtitle, capitalize the first word, the last word, and all principal words, including those that follow hyphens in compound terms” (Gibaldi 103). These are commonly referred to as *heading caps*. Do not capitalize the following unless they begin or end a title, or follow a colon:

- Articles: *a, an, the*.
- Prepositions: *against, between, in, of, to*.
- Conjunctions: *and, but, for, nor, or, so, yet*.
- Infinitive: *to*.

*Sentence capitalization* capitalizes just the first word, the first word after a colon, and any proper nouns in a heading or title.

### Emphasis

Emphasis can be added to a word or phrase by placing it in italics or quotation marks. This is done only *once*, when the word or phrase is first introduced.

- *Scare quotes* is the term given to adding emphasis by placing a word or phrase in quotation marks. They indicate the phrase is being used ironically, or in a nonstandard sense.
- All other emphasis is added by placing a word or phrase in *italics*. Foreign words or special terms are also introduced by placing them in italics (the first time only).

### Numbers as Words

Numbers should be written out if you can do so in *one or two words* (Gibaldi 68). Otherwise, use arabic numerals. Write: *one, five, twenty-one, one hundred, eighteen hundred*, but write *5½, 101, 5,280*.

- *Compound numbers*. Hyphenate compound numbers from *twenty-one* to *ninety-nine*, compounds with a number as the first element (e.g., a *five-fold* increase), and the written form of fractions (e.g., one-half the audience).
- When numbers or a date are required to open a sentence, write them out. For example: “Five girls and 16 boys tried out for the varsity soccer team.” If you can, rewrite the sentence.
- *Numbers & units*. Do not mix numbers that are spelled out with symbols, write out the term for the symbols as well. For example, write: 45%, or forty-five percent; \$20 or twenty dollars.
- *Mixed numbers?* Be consistent, do not mix numerals with written numbers when they refer to similar things. For example, “Only 10 of the 150 people on the tour (not ten of the 150 tourists) were willing to visit the city after the riot.”

### Quotations

Shorter quotes are placed in quotations marks. Longer quotes “more than four lines in your paper” are set off as block quotes (Gibaldi 110). Block quotes are continuously indented from the left margin one inch (most styles indent only one-half inch). Double space within (unless you are using block paragraph spacing), before, and after a block quote, as with the rest of the text. Do not place the quote inside quotation marks.

MLA style has special features for quoting prose, drama, and poetry. It also has both simple rules for editing quotations, and more complex rules for the sophisticated presentation of literary materials. These are best studied in the *Handbook* (Gibaldi sec. 3.7).

