Introduction to the basics of MLA Style –8th Edition

All page numbers cited below are from the MLA Handbook. Copies are available for library use at the Wolfgram Reference desk. Also see Purdue University’s Online Writing Lab (OWL) online.

Why use citations in a research paper?
Official style standards help writers demonstrate competence, establish credibility, clarify which ideas are original and which are not, and give others a “comprehensible, verifiable means of referring to one another’s work” (Handbook 5).

Principles of MLA 8th ed. formatting
MLA 8th edition style uses a flexible, universal system of citation, simpler than earlier versions and adaptable to new media formats.

Principles are:
1. Cite simple traits shared by most works (author, title, etc.)
2. There is often more than one correct way to document a source.
3. Consider your readers’ needs and make your documentation useful to them. (3-4)

Complete documentation is composed of two parts: In-text citations and the works cited list.

In-text citations
In-text citations are an abbreviated form of a source, giving the author clear credit for the readers’ sake. They direct the reader to specific entries in your works-cited list while creating the least possible interruption in the text. This is usually the author’s last name in parenthesis, followed by a page number. This can change, however, depending on the source and the text surrounding your citation. References in the text must match the information in the works cited list (54).

examples:
Reading is “just half of literacy. The other half is writing” (Baron 194). One might even suggest that reading is never complete without writing.

or

According to Naomi Baron, reading is “just half of literacy. The other half is writing” (194). One might even suggest that reading is never complete without writing.

Citation is required “for nearly every kind of borrowing—not only quotations but also facts, and paraphrased ideas” (57). The only exception is for widely-known common knowledge (10). If paragraph numbers take the place of page numbers in the source, place the abbreviation par. or pars. after the author’s last name, followed by the relevant number or numbers. Other kinds of numbered parts include sections (sec., secs.) and chapters (ch., chs.) (56).

The Works Cited List
You must include an alphabetical list of references at the end of your paper. These show the complete details for each source mentioned in the body of the text. With some important exceptions, MLA 8th edition requires the nine elements listed below, if available. A container can be a print journal, website, database, or any other media, and a source can have more than one container.

Example from a print journal article

1. Author: Baron, Naomi S.
2. Title of source: “Redefining Reading: The Impact of Digital Communication Media.”
3. Title of container: PMLA
4. Volume: vol. 128
5. Number: no. 1
6. Publication date: Jan. 2013
7. Location: pp. 193-200

This is enough information to find the article. In the works cited list, it appears in the format below.


For a print journal article with two authors, note the order of first and last names of each author.


With journal articles, listing the format (e.g. “Print.”) is optional and MLA recommends doing so only for unexpected media (e.g. “Transcript”).

Articles accessed using an online database should be identified with the database name (Title of Container) and URL (Location).

Because it has a single author and no credited translator or editor, this book needs only the Author, Title, Publisher, and Date. The city of publication is optional (51).


This entry in an online reference work has no credited author and can begin with the title (24).


Websites often have multiple publishers listed in copyright statement. List all of them, separated by a slash, in the order they appear on the website. It is not required to include the date accessed (41).

Purdue OWL: Online Writing Lab. The Writing Lab/The OWL at Purdue/Purdue University, https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/.

The final example is the Handbook itself. Because the MLA both published and is the credited author of the book, the author element is skipped. Be sure to consult the Handbook for more comprehensive treatment (25).


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