MLA Tutorial
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Chapter 1 What is MLA Style?

This StraighterLine unit will give you an overview of using the style guide of the Modern Language Association (MLA). If you ever find yourself needing to write a very long, complex document such as a thesis, you should obtain your own copy of the MLA handbook; however, this unit will give you all the information you need to succeed in your StraighterLine courses that require MLA documentation.

The point of any style guide is to establish a standard method of formatting written work and documenting sources. In an academic setting, it is important to follow a style consistently and correctly. Using a formal style helps your readers navigate your documents and locate sources for research and cross-referencing.

MLA style is commonly used in humanities disciplines such as English, Foreign Languages, and Cultural Studies, but it is quite common for MLA to be used in other college courses, too. Even if you end up using a different style guide as you progress through your academic career, getting a solid foundation in MLA style will be useful because other common styles (APA, for example) use similar strategies. Still, each style guide is different, so it’s important for you to pay attention to the details of MLA documentation. This unit will show you these details.

In the next chapters, we will discuss the basic formatting, including parenthetical citations and the works cited page. Then we’ll examine some strategies for introducing and formatting quotations effectively. You will learn how to avoid plagiarism and when to cite source information.
We want you to succeed in your StraighterLine course, so please review this unit carefully and make notes. You are free to return to the unit at any point during the course if you need to refresh your memory.
Chapter 2 Basic Format

Let’s start with the basic formatting of your MLA-style essay. Notice these formatting features in the sample page below:

1. One-inch margins
2. Standard 12-point font
3. Double-spacing throughout, including heading
4. Page number and student’s last name at top right
5. Heading:
   a. Student’s name
   b. Professor’s name (if applicable)
   c. Title of course
   d. Date you are submitting the paper
6. Title:
   a. Centered on the page
   b. No special font for your own title, but treat other titles as you normally would (i.e. italicize titles of longer works)

---

[Sample page example]

This is italicized because it is the title of a book. Notice that the rest of your own title uses no special font or punctuation.

---

1 See Appendix C on page 30 for tips on how to insert page numbers
2 Note: Papers you write for your StraighterLine course may have headings that are slightly different from this strict MLA format. Always follow the guidelines set forth in your assignment instructions.
Chapter 3 In-text Citations

Any time you quote from a source, summarize from a source, or paraphrase from a source, you will need to provide a parenthetical citation to show where you obtained that source material. The information you include within these in-text citations will depend on the type of source you’re using (print, online, etc.).

3.1 Print Sources

The basic in-text citation for a print source will include an author’s last name + the page number where you got the material. Take a look at these three examples:

There are many themes in *The Great Gatsby*. The central theme, however, is “a comparison of the corrupting influence of wealth to the purity of a dream—namely, the American Dream” (Taylor 35).

There are many themes in *The Great Gatsby*. But as Taylor has argued, the central theme is “a comparison of the corrupting influence of wealth to the purity of a dream—namely, the American Dream” (35).

There are many themes in *The Great Gatsby*. The central theme, however, critiques the notion of the American Dream as having been tarnished by greed (Taylor 35).

This citation tells us that the author’s last name is Taylor, and the material was taken from page 35.

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3 Refer to the Plagiarism unit for more information, but here is the basic difference: Quoting means you have used the exact words from a source; quoting always requires quotation marks. Summarizing means you have taken the major key points from a source and put those point into your own words. Paraphrasing means you have put an entire passage into your own words.
But notice the subtle differences in each in-text citation: The first one includes the author’s name and page number. The second one includes only the page number because the author’s name already appeared in the text. And the third example shows a paraphrased version of the quote—note that you still need a citation even if you aren’t using an exact quote.

Keep in mind that you want absolute clarity when it comes to referencing sources. So, for example, you should be careful if you have a whole paragraph that contains multiple citations from the same source. If you put only one citation at the end of the paragraph, your reader may not realize the rest of the paragraph came from that source; therefore, you should include a parenthetical citation after every sentence that is taken from a source.

3.2 Online Sources
If your source is from a website, the in-text citation will be handled differently. You will not worry about page numbers for website sources. If the online source has an author listed, you will simply use the author’s last name in the in-text citation.

If the online source has no author listed, you will use a shortened version of the title (the first few words will suffice).
Here are two examples demonstrating these two scenarios:

**Online source with author listed:**
Taking an online course gives students “a glimpse of what is expected in college so they won’t be among those who are unprepared and therefore less successful” (Livingston).

--Works Cited entry for this source:

**Online source with no author listed:**
Some school districts require their teachers to have a master’s degree within five years of entering the profession, so earning an education degree online can “lead to career growth for current and future educators” (“Best Online Programs”).

--Works Cited entry for this source:

Ultimately, the parenthetical citations in the text of your essays will correspond to the first element of the related Works Cited entry. We’ll cover this in Chapter 4.

### 3.3 Indirect Sources
You will likely find yourself in a position where you are using a source that quotes other sources. What should you do if you are quoting a source that is contained in another source?

Since you are not actually using the original source, your Works Cited page will include only the source you are actually using. But you need to indicate that you have not read the original source.

You will do this by including the phrase “qtd. in” within your parenthetical citation. This phrase simply means “quoted in.”
Using the Livingston source from the previous example, here is what you should do: Let’s assume that you are reading the article “Considering Online Education,” written by Robert Livingston. Now let’s say that Livingston quotes a really good point from a researcher named Robin McCarty. Here is an example of how you could handle this:

McCarty’s 2005 study found that adult learners are more likely to be self-directed students and will succeed in online classes (qtd. in Livingston).

Note: Your Works Cited page would not include the 2005 McCarty study, but it would include the Livingston source.
Chapter 4 Works Cited Page

Even though your Works Cited page goes at the very end of your essay, it’s a great idea to start drafting this list as you are writing so you will know what to include in your parenthetical citations. Your parenthetical, in-text citations refer your reader to specific entries on the Works Cited list.

4.1 Formatting
The Works Cited page will start on a separate page at the end of your essay. You should maintain double-spacing and one-inch margins, just like the rest of the essay.

You’ll need to title the page simply Works Cited. No special font or punctuation is required.

The entries will use a format known as “hanging indentation.” This is sort of the reverse of typical indentation; rather than indenting the first line, you will indent the second and subsequent lines of each entry.

The entries should be alphabetized. Do not number them.

Here is a Works Cited page snippet demonstrating these rules:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Works Cited</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Now that you can see the general formatting, we can talk about the content of each entry.
4.2 What to Include
Below are some snapshots of the format and the information included for the preceding Works Cited entries:

**Book: Format**
Last, First. *Title of Book*. City of Publication: Publisher, Year of Publication. Medium of Publication.

**Book: Example**

Notice the use of italics for the title of the book. Titles of longer works (Books, Magazines, Website Titles, Newspapers, Journals) should be italicized. In previous versions of the MLA handbook, these titles were underlined instead. To demonstrate an up-to-date knowledge of the style, you should use italics.

**Web: Format (with author listed)**
Last, First. “Article or Document Title.” Website Title. Publisher or sponsoring organization (often found in the Copyright at the bottom of the page), Date of Publication. Medium of Publication. Date you accessed the material. URL (If you want to include it—but MLA does not require it)

**Web: Example (with author listed)**
A few things to note about the example above: First, this example assumes you're citing individual pages of websites—not the entire website, which is less common. Now, notice the “n.d.” in the example; this stands for “no date,” and it means the website document didn’t list a date of publication. Next, the quotation marks go around the document title because that’s how you format titles of shorter works. Think of it this way: For documents that are contained in larger works, you’ll usually put those in quotation marks. So individual article titles (contained within newspapers, magazines, or journals) or individual website documents (contained within a website) will go inside of quotation marks.

Since there is no author listed for this source, you would simply omit that part of the entry. Start with the next piece of information, which is the title of the article or document.

The preceding examples are not comprehensive; we’ve just given you three commonly used sources. You can turn to Appendix A on page 25 of this document for a more complete list of Works Cited examples.
Now that you’ve seen how to format basic in-text citations and a few Works Cited entries, we can talk about the most effective ways to include source information in your essays.
Chapter 5 Introducing Quotations

Whenever you have a good quote that you want to use in an essay, you will need to integrate that quote smoothly within your own words. You will typically introduce each quotation with what is known as a “signal phrase,” and you’ll follow each quotation with a parenthetical in-text citation denoting the author’s name and page number, or just the page number if you’ve already clearly established who the author is.

5.1 Using Signal Phrases

Keep in mind that you will not want to have entire quotations standing alone as sentences; this is known as a freestanding quote (other terms for this include a naked quote or a dropped quote). To avoid freestanding quotes, you will need to introduce all direct quotations with a signal phrase.

When writers fail to use good signal phrases, readers are left with no context for the quotations. Essentially, this is the main reason why signal phrases are necessary: to provide context.

You may want to use the source author’s full name (along with any relevant contextual information) the first time you use the source. In subsequent references, you can simply refer to the author’s last name only, or you may opt not to mention the author’s name in the actual signal phrase (you would instead put the name inside of the parenthetical citation). Read on for specific examples:
The highlighted words represent the signal phrase for each example. Notice that the first use includes the article title and journal title where the source was found. Please note that you don’t have to give all of this information for every source you use; however, this kind of context gives the reader more information about the source and can add to your credibility as a researcher. Also note that the author’s last name must appear either in the signal phrase or in the parenthetical citation.

Notice, especially in the first two examples from above, the use of strong verbs in the signal phrases (Lynch argues, Lynch contends). Using a specific verb in your signal phrase is a great way to show how the source relates to the overall argument. So you might ask yourself what the author of the quote is actually saying: Is she/he observing? Emphasizing? Refuting? Claiming?

The following list contains some good verbs for building signal phrases:
In general, any direct quotations will be contained within your essay’s paragraphs, just like the rest of the text; however, if you choose to use a quotation that is unusually long, you will need to format it a bit differently.

### 5.2 Block Quotations

Longer quotes, or quotes that run more than four full lines of text, are referred to as “block quotations.” First, it’s important that you use discretion when deciding how much text to quote. Generally, you’ll want fewer direct quotations and more of your own style (i.e., more paraphrasing). But if you come across a quotation that is particularly poignant or useful, you may choose to use it in its entirety. If the quote runs more than four lines, you should format it as follows:

- Introduce the quote with a complete sentence followed by a colon
- Start on a new line
- Indent the entire quotation one-inch from the left margin
- Double-space
- Do not use quotation marks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ADMITS</th>
<th>ILLUSTRATES</th>
<th>REJECTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AGREES</td>
<td>IMPLIES</td>
<td>REPORTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARGUES</td>
<td>INSISTS</td>
<td>RESPOND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASSERTS</td>
<td>MAINTAINS</td>
<td>STATES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BELIEVES</td>
<td>NEGATES</td>
<td>SUGGESTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLAIMS</td>
<td>NOTES</td>
<td>SUPPORTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMMENTS</td>
<td>OBSERVES</td>
<td>THEORIZES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMPARES</td>
<td>OFFERS</td>
<td>WRITES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONcedes</td>
<td>POINTS OUT</td>
<td>VERIFIES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUDES</td>
<td>POSITS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCURS</td>
<td>PRESENTS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DECLARES</td>
<td>REASONS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMPHASIZES</td>
<td>REFUTES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In ______’s words,

According to _______,

In ______’s words,

According to _______,

---
Below is an example of a properly formatted block quotation:

In his critique of The Great Gatsby, Michael Hunt insists that Fitzgerald was not thinking of contemporary art and music when he penned the novel:

The problem is, author F. Scott Fitzgerald didn’t see the Jazz Age as all about hip music and sparkly clothes. He associated the entire period with materialism (“I want things! Lots of things!”) and immorality. For many of the post-World War I era’s newly wealthy, materialism and immortality were the name of the game. The novel’s star is Jay Gatsby, a young, rich man in love with a society girl from his past. A girl who, as it happens, is married to someone else. (42)

So far in this lesson, you’ve learned the basics of citing and documenting sources using MLA style. The next section will remind you of some strategies for avoiding plagiarism.
Chapter 6 Avoiding Plagiarism

A major goal that we have at StraighterLine is to help you understand how to cite, not only to help you boost your credibility as a researcher, but also to show you how to avoid plagiarism. Please remember that you can refer back to the Plagiarism Unit at any point, but here are a few important reminders from that Unit.

StraighterLine has some guidelines to help you avoid plagiarizing:

1. Place any exact words or phrases from a source in quotation marks, and provide a parenthetical citation.

2. If you summarize or paraphrase source material, be sure it is sufficiently reworded. Try to adopt your own style and voice. And importantly, you must provide parenthetical citations for summarized or paraphrased source material.

3. For assignments that do not require research, do not consult sources at all; use only your own thoughts and ideas. You'll avoid the temptation to lift ideas from other sources, and you won't have to worry about how effectively you have paraphrased or quoted.

4. Submit only your own work.

5. Never purchase essays to pass off as your own work. Purchased essays will always, 100% of the time, be identified by Turnitin.

6. Never submit essays that have been submitted in previous courses. Previously submitted essays will be picked up in the Turnitin database.
Chapter 7 Knowing When to Cite

Understanding when you should cite is a major step toward the goal of using MLA correctly and avoiding plagiarism. You may recall seeing some of these pointers in section 5.1 of the Plagiarism Unit, but here are some examples of situations that require documentation to credit a source:

- If you use words or ideas from a book, magazine, song, movie, television show, website, newspaper, letter, computer program, advertisement, or any other type of source.

- If you conduct an interview and use that information in a paper. The interview might be on the phone, through email, in person, or in writing, but you still must provide documentation for this information.

- Whenever you use any information from the internet, including pictures, photos, audio, video, or anything else. If you own the image, then you do not need to cite.

- Whenever you use any diagrams, charts, tables, illustrations, or any other visual materials. If you create the visual yourself, you do not need to cite the image.

- Whenever you use verbatim wording or particularly apt phrases.

The main point, then, is that you must give credit and provide documentation whenever you use text, ideas, or anything else that a person other than you came up with. If you are writing an essay strictly about your own personal experience, with only your own thoughts and ideas, and only your own inferences, then you do not need to cite.

Likewise, if you mention something that is generally accepted as fact and would not be disputed (e.g., cancer is a terrible disease), you won’t need a citation.

And if you are discussing information that is considered to be “common knowledge,” you will not need to cite.
7.1 Common Knowledge
Here are a few examples that illustrate common knowledge:

✓ Common sense statements (e.g., Water pollution is bad)
✓ Well-known urban legends (e.g., Some people claim to have seen Bigfoot)
✓ Historical events (e.g., JFK was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, in 1963)

Notice what these examples have in common. First of all, no one would reasonably dispute any of these statements. Second, no one really deserves credit for discovering any of this information. Third, all of these statements could be found uncited in various sources.

With these things in mind, here are three questions to consider when deciding if something is common knowledge:

1. Can you locate the exact same information uncited in at least five reliable sources?
2. Does someone in particular deserve credit for discovering the information?
3. Would anyone be able to credibly dispute the information?

If you ever are in doubt about whether or not you should cite something, it is always safer to just cite it. But we are here to help, so please contact us if you have questions about any of this information.

Note: If you were to make more specific claims, then you would need a citation. For example, if you wanted to mention that the Chesapeake Bay has seen X increase in water pollution over the past decade, then you would need to cite the scientist who came up with that data. Or if you wanted to discuss a disputed conspiracy theory about the JFK assassination, then you would need to cite sources.
Chapter 8 Putting It All Together

By this point, you should have a good overview of how to handle MLA documentation in the essays you submit to StraighterLine.

The information in this lesson may seem overwhelming, but keep in mind that learning and using a citation style is a work-in-progress. If you practice using MLA style, it will get easier over time.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember is that you must at least attempt to provide documentation whenever you quote, paraphrase, or summarize source information. You must give credit and provide documentation whenever you use text, ideas, or anything else that a person other than you came up with. Using sources adds to your own credibility as a writer and researcher because it shows that your argument is being debated by others.

So the bottom line is that you need parenthetical, in-text citations to show where you obtained source material, and those in-text citations will correspond to an entry on your Works Cited page.

The sample essay on the following page demonstrates most of the major points covered in this lesson.
Funding Faith-Based Schools in Ontario

Since the foundation of Canada, there has been a controversy over whether the government should fund private faith-based schools. Those who believe that faith-based schools should be funded argue that their tax dollars should be used for an education of their choice and that the value of freedom of religion should be respected. Furthermore, they posit that there will always be faith-based schools and if the government gets involved, it will then be able to monitor the activities of these schools. In Canada, equality is legally enshrined in the country’s freedoms. Thus, people argue that all faith-based schools should legally be funded on this basis. Therefore, based on legal, social and financial grounds, all faith-based schools should be at least partially publicly funded with preconditions from the Government to ensure that the good of society is maintained.

In an article published in the *Politics and Religion Journal*, Duncan MacLellan recounts that the issue of publicly funding faith-based schools started even before Confederation; and in Upper Canada, the *School Act of 1841* (39). At the time, the Chief of Upper Canada had to fund Roman Catholic schools. When Confederation was established, the *North America Act* gave the provinces power over education and Roman Catholic schools received public funds under the policy of the British North America Act (39). Other religious groups, like the *American Rights and Reforms*, were excluded from this power. If in a single paragraph you cite repeatedly from the same source—with no intervening citations from other sources—then all parenthetical citations after the first one may only contain page numbers. If you start a new paragraph, you should restate the author’s name.
The next section will show you the corresponding Works Cited page for this essay.
8.2 Works Cited Entries for Sample Essay

The entries are alphabetized according to the first word in each entry.

Your Works Cited list should start on its own separate page. The title is capitalized as you see here, but uses no special punctuation.

Note that the second lines of each entry are indented, but the first lines are not; this is known as "hanging indentation."

Read on for even more examples of Works Cited entries.
Appendix A: Examples of Sources
The following list demonstrates how various types of sources would look on a Works Cited page.

**Book**


**Journal**


**Magazine**
Last, First. "Title of Article." *Title of Magazine* Full date of publication: Page range. Medium.

Newspaper
Last, First. “Title of Article.” Title of Newspaper Full publication date: page. Medium.


Website (with listed author)
Last, First. “Title of Website Document or Article.” Title of Overall Website. Sponsoring Organization, full date of publication. Medium. Full date when you accessed the page. <URL>.


Website (no listed author, no listed date of publication)
“Title of Website Document or Article.” Title of Overall Website

Remember, MLA does not require that you include the URL, and it can be cumbersome to include a lengthy, complex URL. We included the URL in the example here to show you how you should format it if you do decide to include it.
Website. Sponsoring Organization, n.d. Medium. Full date when you accessed the page.


Film (on DVD)
Title of Film. Dir. Director’s First and Last Name. Perf. Top-billed actors. Distributor, Year of film release. Medium.


Political Cartoon from the Web


Personal Interview
Last, First. Personal Interview. Date you conducted the interview.

Note: You will cite a comic strip the same way. Simply exchange the term “Cartoon” for “Comic Strip.”
Hall, Jennifer. Personal Interview. 12 July 2013.

The preceding list is not intended to be comprehensive, but it should cover most of the sources that you will want to cite in your StraighterLine course. The final section of this unit provides some resources in case you need further help with MLA style documentation.
Appendix B: MLA Resources

In addition to this MLA unit that we have provided you at StraighterLine, you may find these resources useful:

- **MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, seventh edition**
  - This handbook is a complete guide to MLA style.
- **The Purdue OWL website:** [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/08/](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/08/)
  - This website provides an overview and a workshop for MLA style
- **EasyBib:** [http://www.easybib.com/](http://www.easybib.com/)
  - This site gives lots of information about how to cite various sources. You can enter in some sources to generate a citation, or you can manually enter in the source information to generate a Works Cited entry.
- **KnightCitations:** [https://www.calvin.edu/library/knightcite/](https://www.calvin.edu/library/knightcite/)
  - Similar to EasyBib, this website will generate Works Cited entries for you if you enter in the source information. Here is a screenshot of the main page:
Appendix C: Inserting Page Numbers

Inserting page numbers and your last name in the header of your papers is actually a simple process, but it can seem tricky starting out. Follow these steps, and you should have no problems:

1. Click the “Insert” tab at the top of your Word document.
2. Click the “Page Number” option.
3. Select where to place the numbers (you’ll want them at the top).\(^7\)
4. Select where to place the numbers (you’ll need to select the right-hand side of the page).

Once you select where to place the numbers, the number should appear on the first page.

5. Double-click on the page number. A cursor should pop up in the header, just before the page number.
6. Type in your last name, and click your cursor on the body of the essay (out of the header area).

Your last name should now automatically appear in front of page numbers on all pages of your essay.

Figures 1 through 3 below illustrate this process.

\(^7\) Note: depending on your version of Word, Steps 3 and 4 might be combined.
Sarah Copeland
Composition I
Argumentative Essay
19 August 2013

Anti-Plagiarism Software

Rick Letspoich, a professor at the Indiana State University stated that “the electronic revolution cuts both ways. It makes plagiarism a lot easier and checking a lot easier” (qtd. in Clark). As technology increases, the temptation to cheat and steal from internet sources increases. With the increased cases of plagiarism of internet sources, technology developers designed anti-plagiarism software. This software intends to deter students from plagiarizing and catch those who do plagiarize. Although students can still fool the anti-plagiarism software by purchasing custom research papers, anti-plagiarism software not only deters students from

Figure 1: Paper without page numbers
Figure 2: Drop-down menu under “Page Numbers” option
Anti-Plagiarism Software

J. Lettspoich, a professor at the Indiana State University stated that “the electronic cuts both ways. It makes plagiarism a lot easier and checking a lot easier” (qtd. in technology increases, the temptation to cheat and steal from internet sources

With the increased cases of plagiarism of internet sources, technology developers anti-plagiarism software. This software intends to deter students from plagiarizing and who do plagiarize. Although students can still fool the anti-plagiarism software by

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Figure 3: Type your last name in front of the number