

# MLA DOCUMENTATION BASICS

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MLA stands for Modern Language Association; it publishes a style guide entitled *MLA Handbook* which is now in its eighth edition (2016). MLA is often used in Linguistics, Literature, Communications, Philosophy and Religion studies. Although there are many different style guides such as the American Psychology Association (APA) and the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE), they all have the same goal: to set a standard for good writing and provide a consistent method to format your papers and document your sources. Make sure to confirm which style your professor expects.

## WHAT DOES A STYLE GUIDE DO?

A style guide helps you prepare academic texts like research papers. It explains how to format your paper and document (or cite) your sources. For example, it shows:

- What to include in a list of works cited or in a bibliography
- How to document a work with multiple authors
- How to identify editors or translators
- How to format your paper including font size, cover page, and page numbering

## WHY SHOULD I DOCUMENT MY SOURCES?

- To allow readers to locate your sources if they wish to read them for themselves
- To acknowledge the work done by others
- To provide support for the position you take on a controversial issue
- To establish links with the experts in your field of study
- To add credibility to your work

## WHERE DO I PROVIDE DOCUMENTATION FOR A SOURCE?

You document a source in two places:

- Within your paper when you introduce a quotation, paraphrase information or summarize a passage (in-text documentation)
- At the end of your paper when you provide complete information that allows your readers to locate your sources (Works Cited)

It is important to note that properly documenting your sources takes quite some time, especially if it is your first time or you are using a new style guide.

## IN-TEXT DOCUMENTATION

### QUOTATIONS

Although the use of direct quotations should be kept to a minimum, in academic writing we sometimes find them essential. We use direct quotations when the original author's writing is famous, beautiful, poignant, or, for some other reason, important to keep intact.

### SHORT QUOTATIONS (FEWER THAN 4 LINES)

*If the quote is integrated into your sentence, either use a comma or no punctuation depending on the grammar. If the quote is not integrated, use a colon, then open quotation marks*

*Author's Family Name(s)*

Leimann suggests that you can use writing to help you “organize your ideas, pull information together, discover what you think about an issue, or make a difficult reading clear” (293).

*Close quote, add page number (if available) parentheses, End with period.*

### LONG QUOTATION (MORE THAN 4 LINES)

The following is an excerpt from an essay about documenting your sources. Notice that because the writer has chosen a longer quotation, they use *block-style* format.

As a researcher, you must be especially careful that you do not plagiarize. You may accidentally plagiarize if you do not keep your research organized. Consider the following advice from the MLA Handbook 8<sup>th</sup> edition author James Smith:

*Colon unless your sentence is grammatically connected to the quote; then use any applicable punctuation*

*No quotation marks for a long quotation*

Take care in your notes to distinguish between what is not yours and what is yours, identifying ideas and phrases copied from sources you consult, summaries of your sources, and your own original ideas. As you write, carefully identify all borrowed material, including quoted words and phrases, paraphrased idea, summarized arguments, and facts and other information.

*Indent entire passage 10 spaces*

*Author's name and page number in parentheses, if available, at the end of the quote.  
Note: If you include the author's name in your text (which is done above), insert only the page number here.*

*Maintain the same spacing as paper*

*Period at the end of the quotation*

## PARAPHRASING

When you are writing for academic purposes, you usually do not use direct quotations. In fact, the academic writer PARAPHRASES the information into their OWN words more often than not. Remember, the words are yours, but the ideas belong to another writer and therefore, you **MUST** give the reader the original source.

### HOW DO I PARAPHRASE ANOTHER WRITER'S WORDS?

Read the passage and ask yourself *What is this all about?* or *What point is the author trying to make?* Close the book, and in your own words, jot down what you think the author is saying. Read the original passage again to make sure you captured the author's meaning. Ask yourself *Is the author positive, negative or neutral about the topic?* This question refers to the author's tone and message; when paraphrasing, you must not change the tone of the original source to suit your tone. If necessary, revise your paraphrase so that it matches the author's ideas and tone. Note the documentation details so you won't have to look them up again.

The following is the original direct quote:

“Take care in your notes to distinguish between what is not yours and what is yours, identifying ideas and phrases copied from sources you consult, summaries of your sources, and your own original ideas. As you write, carefully identify all borrowed material, including quoted words and phrases, paraphrased idea, summarized arguments, and facts and other information (MLA Handbook, 2016).”

The following is a paraphrased version with documentation:

As a researcher, you must be especially careful that you do not plagiarize by accident. You may accidentally plagiarize if you do not keep your research organized. The MLA Handbook suggests that you keep your information carefully organized and make sure to separate your original ideas from the ideas of other authors (10).



*This is a paraphrase of the long quotation from above. Put author's idea into your own words, but make sure you do not change the author's intent.*

## DOCUMENTATION AT THE END OF YOUR TEXT

The eighth edition of the MLA Handbook acknowledges that academic writers no longer rely solely on books and journal articles to support their ideas; many references are found online and may have very different source information from traditional sources. With that in mind, the MLA Handbook suggests a systematic list of “core elements” that the writer should **try** to include. The understanding is that while the writer should try to provide as many elements as possible, not all sources will have all elements on the list. Writers must follow the order of the list. If an item on the list is not relevant to the source it may be omitted. The list below indicates the order, italics and punctuation for each item and corresponds to the following diagram.

1. Author.
2. “Title of source”.
3. *Title of container*, (the larger document from where your source is embedded)
4. Other contributors,
5. Version,
6. Number,
7. Publisher,
8. Publication date,
9. Location.

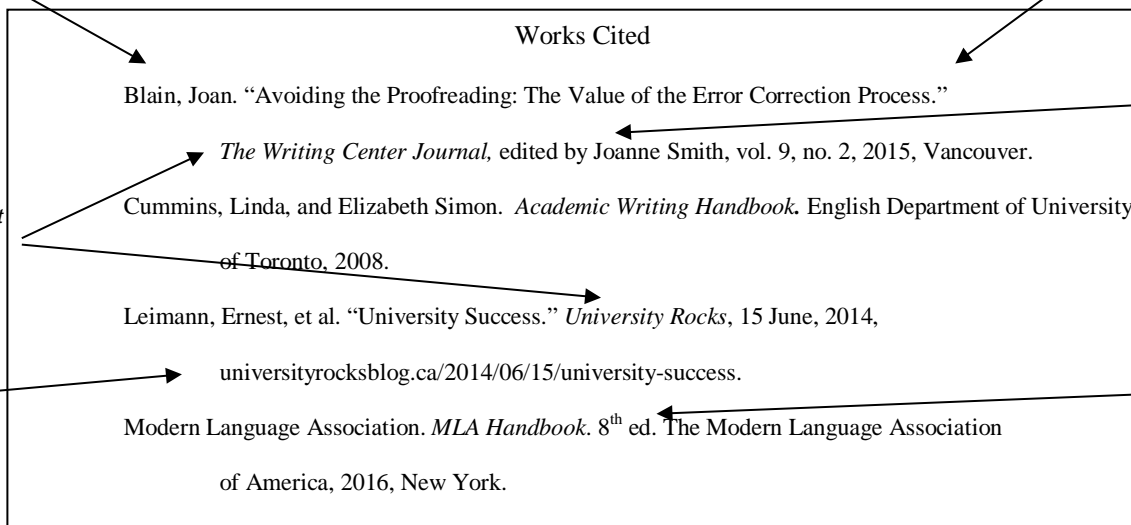
1. **Author's name**  
surname then first  
name or initial (as  
given) then a period

List sources on a separate sheet at  
the end of your paper. Give your list  
the title “Works Cited”.

2. **Title of article or chapter:** open  
quotation marks, title capitalized as  
usual, period, closed quotation  
marks. If a book, do not use quotes

3. **Container:** if the  
source is a smaller  
part that comes from  
a larger whole. An  
article from a  
website, an article  
from a journal, at TV  
show from a series, it  
is considered the  
container. Use italics  
and a comma.

Indent second and  
subsequent lines 5  
spaces



4. **Other  
contributors**  
6. **Number**  
7. **Publisher**  
8. **Publication  
date**

5. **Version**

If you need further help you can consult the MLA website <https://style.mla.org/>  
Concordia’s libraries are an excellent resource and you can ask a librarian for help anytime.

The On-line Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue University is also very helpful

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/02/>