Student Name

Instructor’s Name

Course Number

6 August 2019

A Template Showing How to Use MLA Format for Research Papers and

Other Writing Assignments

The purpose of the introduction (which you should always write last, after the rest of the paper is finished) is to provide a meaningful context for the question your paper is designed to answer and to state your one-sentence answer to the question. The one-sentence answer to your question is your paper’s thesis. In theory, you could use the introduction to state the question and then state the answer in the conclusion (instead of putting the answer in the introduction). But although it is technically acceptable to put your thesis in the conclusion instead of in the introduction, there is no benefit to you or your readers in not stating your thesis in the introduction, and there are many disadvantages in leaving your readers in ignorance of your main point until the very end.

**Documenting Sources in MLA Format**

Complete source citation includes both a list of all the sources you have referred to in your paper (called a works-cited list) and a separate reference (called an in-text citation) at each point in your paper where you have used something from a source. The purpose of in-text citation is to tell readers (a) where you have used ideas or language from a source, (b) specifically what content comes from a source, and (c) which source it comes from. To do that effectively, each in-text citation needs to be clearly and unambiguously linked to its corresponding works-cited list entry. In MLA format, the two key identifiers for each source are author and title, in that order. That means that if your source has an author, the author’s last name is the basis for in-text citations referring to that source, along with a page number to indicate the location of the cited information (Zepernick 11). If you name the author in your sentence (for example, in a statement like “as Author points out,” “Author argues that,” or “Author’s research shows that”), your in-text citation does not need to restate the author’s name, so it will consist only of the page number (12). Statements like the examples above that let you identify the author are called attribution phrases because they attribute the information to a source. Once you have used the author’s name, either in an attribution phrase or in an in-text citation, your subsequent references to that source can consist of page number only – until you introduce another source, at which point you need to use the author’s name again to show which source you are referring to (Winters 224). If your source has no author, the basis for the in-text citation will be a shortened version of the title, again with a page number (“Using” 3). When an in-text citation appears at the end of a clause or sentence, “closing punctuation goes after the in-text citation” (Zepernick 13).

When you are using ideas or information from a source, try hard to put the information in your own words rather than quoting directly from the source. (Remember that you do need to cite the source whether you quote the source’s actual words or put it in your own words.) Save quotation for times when the language of the source is as important as the ideas or information conveyed, and then limit quoted material to the smallest possible number of words that will let you accomplish your goal. When using quoting, also remember that a quote should not occur as a stand-alone sentence; instead, build the quote into a sentence of your own. Using attributions phrases is an easy way to do that.

When citing sources in MLA, you need to be aware that different numbers of authors are treated differently in in-text citations. The in-text citation for a work with one author (Zepernick 14) or two authors (Smith and Jones 375) will appear in the same format throughout the text. When a source has three or more authors, the in-text citation will consist of first author plus et al., like this: (Lee et al. 41). Also note the assertion made by Lee et al. about block quotes:

A quote of four lines or more should be represented in the form of a block quote. Block quotes are indented one half inch from the left margin. Block quotes may include multiple sentences and might even include a paragraph break.

When a new paragraph starts within a block quote, the first line of the new paragraph is indented an additional one-half inch. In addition, note that quotations marks are not used with block quotes, and the closing punctuation goes before the in-text citation. (42)

Just as a quote should never be a stand-alone sentence in your paper, a block quote should never be a stand-alone paragraph, so no matter how long your block quote is, be sure to begin and end the paragraph with your own words.

The attached works-cited list includes examples of most of the kinds of sources you will encounter often and probably a lot of sources that you will only encounter a few times in your academic career. All of the in-text citations in this paper were made up for the purpose of illustrating the citation rule explained at each point, and we’ve made up some works-cited list entries to go with them, so although some of the sources included in the works-cited list are real, some are fictional and do not correspond to an actual document. Since the goal of this document is to show you how to cite sources effectively, it seems less than ideal to break the most important rule of source citation, which is that your sources should be real and that the information from the sources should be accurately cited. I’m sorry about that, and if you’d like to complain, please come to the Writing Center in 112 Axe Library and we’ll offer you a free lesson in using MLA format with your very own sources to make up for it.

**Page Layout and Formatting**

When instructors ask for “MLA format,” sometimes they are referring only to the MLA system for documenting sources (the works-cited list, in-text citations, and attribution phrases). In that case, the instructor will provide specific requirements for page layout and other formatting issues (or will encourage you to follow your best judgment about formatting). However, sometimes the instructor wants you to follow MLA’s formatting guidelines for page layout, title page, and running head, as well. As a general rule, a document in MLA format will be double-spaced with no extra blank lines between paragraphs. Page numbers and the author’s last name will appear in a running head at the top of the page; the first page (title page) will have a header as shown on the title page of this document; first level section headers for all sections after the introduction will be in bold face with no extra space before or after; and the works-cited list will start on a new page after the last page of the main text.

**Conclusion**

The most important guideline anyone can give you is always to read the instructions for the assignment, to follow them carefully, and to remember that the instructor’s course-specific or assignment-specific guidelines always take precedence over any general system of rules. That said, however, I want to end by begging you to forget the principle of using the conclusion to summarize your paper. Unless you are a very disorganized writer, your readers will arrive at your conclusion with a very clear sense of your overall argument, and so a summary is a waste of the reader’s time. Instead, use the conclusion to extend your thesis beyond the narrow confines of the paper in some way.

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