How to Format a Paper in MLA Style: A Sample

In this paper, we explain how to format an MLA style paper. In MS Word, using the blank document template and adding necessary formatting is easier than using the MLA paper template. If you format manually, you can control the appearance and placement of the Works Cited list, and can format correctly a wide range of source citations. (That was the thesis statement, which should appear in the first or second paragraph.)

First set the margins of all pages to one inch on all sides. Also set the line spacing to double (that is, 2) and make sure there is no space before and after paragraphs.

Make sure to select the correct font for your paper. Some professors want Times New Roman. Whatever font you use, it should be 10- to 12-point.

Some professors want a separate title page, but this is not usual in MLA style. Normally, you should use flush left-aligned paragraphs to give your name, your professor’s name, your course and section number, and the date on the first page as shown above. Then create a new paragraph for the title centered on the page. Make sure this title paragraph is formatted without an indented first line.

The title of your paper should fit on one line, rarely two. Use the same font for the title that you use for the rest of the paper. Do not use boldface. Capitalize all important words, and if there is a subtitle, capitalize its first word even if it is A, An, or The as shown.
Put a header and numbers on all the pages. In MLA style the header can be your last name. Page numbers should be aligned to the right.

Paragraphs in the body of the paper should be aligned left, with the first line indented. If you quote more than three lines from a source, the quotation should be a separate paragraph set in by another half inch from the left margin. Do not use tabs to do this. Headings within the paper should be separate paragraphs like the title, aligned center with no indent.

In-Text Citations

You must cite the source of all information you convey in your paper unless it is well known. Asserting that the sky is blue needs no citation. Elaborating that the sky appears blue because the specific gases and particulates in the earth’s atmosphere reflect light in the blue range of the spectrum (“Rayleigh scattering”), needs a citation just like that. This citation was for an online encyclopedia article with no named author, so only the short title is given. It is an article title, so it goes in quotes; book titles are in italics.

Most in-text citations will include only the author’s last name and the page number like this (Lastname 10). If there are two authors give both (Lastname and Surname 10). For three or more authors, give only the first author’s last name plus the two words “et al.” and the page (Lastname et al. 20). Cite a website or page on a website using the author’s name or a short title. Citations can appear before commas, or at the end of a sentence before any punctuation. If all the information in one paragraph came from one source, cite it at the end of the last sentence.

You may want to back up a statement with citations to two or more sources. In such cases, separate the citations with a semi-colon (Lastname 30; Writer 5). If you use more than one work by the same author, you need to distinguish the specific work you have drawn from in each
citation by adding a shortened title between the author name and the page. Use quotes for an article or chapter and italics for a book (Lastname Book 20; Lastname “Article” 10).

Footnotes and Endnotes

Use endnotes or footnotes for additional information, not citations, as explained in note 1, which is on page 5.¹ Use a superscript number for the in-text endnote reference. The text of endnotes should appear on a separate page before the list of works cited. Add endnotes and their references manually, do not use the References menu in MS Word. MLA does not recommend using footnotes at all, and most publishers do not accept manuscripts with footnotes.

The Works Cited List

All in-text citations should correspond to a full citation in the works cited list at the end of your paper. This is on a separate page after any notes. The only way to create this in MS Word is to add a page break for the notes page(s), and then add a page break for the Works Cited. The works cited list should have a title, which is a paragraph aligned in the center of the page. It should not be bold face. The citations are all individual paragraphs with the first line hanging out one-half inch over the rest of the text, but still aligned left with a one-inch margin. Do not use tabs to do this. Put the citations in alphabetical order.

The Works Cited page shows example citations of a journal article, one chapter, an entire book, an encyclopedia article, and websites. The first part of a full citation is the author’s name, if an author is given. Then comes the title of the article, single chapter, or entire book. Article and chapter titles go between quotation marks; entire book titles are in italics. For an entire book, give the publisher’s name after the title and the year. See the examples.

For an article in print or online, it is helpful to think of a series of containers. After the author, give the article title, journal title in italics, volume number and issue number of a journal,
and the year, followed by the page numbers. An article or book that you accessed from a database such as EBSCO or ProQuest then needs the URL, followed by the access date.

Cite websites like books and webpages like articles: give the title of the specific page on the website where you got your information, as well as the website itself. You can often find the author or editor’s name in the “About” section of a website. For examples, see the works cited.

Illustrations

If you want to reproduce a chart, table, or picture (called a figure) from a source, you can do this as long as you place a full citation beneath it, using footnote style. Charts, tables, and figures should be numbered (don’t re-use the original numbering) and placed close to where you refer to them in your text. For an example, see figure 1. The space taken up by charts, tables, and figures will be deducted from your page count by your professor, because they often create gaps.


Conclusion

There are many writing resources. Try the Purdue Online Writing Lab (Russell, et al.) and the MLA style center online. You will find examples of other types of source citations there and more sample papers. Using NoodleTools is very helpful for formatting citations; access it on the Ivy Tech Fort Wayne Library website. You can also ask a librarian or an English tutor for in-person help. Your ideas are most important, and they deserve proper formatting.
Note

1. MLA recommends using an endnote for additional information, as we have here, where it will not distract from the argument. MLA prefers citations not be placed in notes, but in the text using parentheses. Notice that the in-text reference number is superscript, while the number on the note itself is not. Notes should be numbered consecutively using Arabic numerals. Notes should be formatted like paragraphs in the normal text of the paper. The page title is formatted like a heading. If there is more than one endnote, this page is titled Notes.
Works Cited


These are comments, which would not appear in a real paper. Most of the works cited here are for example only. The first entry is a book. This publisher’s name, State University Press, can be abbreviated in all the entries. The second entry is a chapter by one author in a book edited by another person. The editor’s name is in normal order. The in-text citation uses only the author’s name, not the editor’s: (Author 22)

The third entry is a book with two authors. The second name is in normal order. In-text form: (Booker and Writer 7)

Fourth entry: a section of a book with a corporate author, republished as a webpage on a website. (“Formatting”)

Fifth entry: an article originally published in a journal on non-consecutive pages, shown with the plus sign. The journal volume and number are Winter 2012. It has been republished in a database. (McLeod)

Sixth entry: an encyclopedia article without a named author, in an online database. (“Rayleigh Scattering”)

Seventh entry shows how to cite more than two authors. It is a dated webpage on a larger website. (Russell et al.)

Eighth entry is for an article that appears in a journal. Because journals have volume and issue numbers, only the year is given in the date. (Writer 9).