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MLA Format: Not As Difficult As It Seems

Writing an MLA-formatted paper can seem like a daunting task at first, especially when students view their teachers as red-pen-happy, paper-slaying dragons. Fortunately, with the advent of easy-to-use word-processing software such as Microsoft Word and Google Docs, the task of properly formatting a paper has become relatively simple. Making a paper's format meet the expectations of even the strictest teacher is simple: the writer lays out the heading, title, and margins, writes cohesive paragraphs, credits sources with in-text citations, and seals the deal with a comprehensive works-cited page.

Proper format helps readers find all of the information they seek quickly and clearly, and poor formatting makes a bad first impression. To make the right first impression, a paper should have an MLA-style heading and title. The heading begins with the writer's first and last name; the second line is the teacher's name; on the following line is the class title or period; and the last line of the heading has the date the paper is due (some instructors may prefer the date the paper is written). The entire paper is double-spaced, which means one line of blank after each line of text. On the next line (one double-space from the date), the paper's title should be centered and capitalized, but not punctuated unless it includes a published title within it. A good title is one that gives more than basic information about the subject of the paper (Pollard). Additionally, if the paper extends to more than one page, the writer's surname and the page number should be

included in the header at the top-right of each page in the header section, one-half inch from the top (though some instructors may prefer that the first page have no header) (*MLA* 116-118).

Even more important than the first impression of formatting is cohesive writing in the body of the paper. The introduction to the paper should hook the reader by giving background information—perhaps leading the reader through controversies, concerns, or complications of the subject matter—and guiding the reader to the writer's thesis: a clearly-stated argument that the writer makes in the paper. Different types of papers demand different types of thesis statements; analytical, expository, and argumentative papers each have different purposes, and the thesis statement of each will vary accordingly (Tardiff and Brizee). Following the introduction, the reader should encounter several body paragraphs that bring supporting elements of the thesis into clear view; each of the body paragraphs should include specific details that help bolster the claim made in that paragraph, and those details should be made mostly of evidence from other writers, in the form of quotations or paraphrased text with parenthetical citations.

Because the evidence a writer uses for support will be almost entirely based on other writers' work, proper citations for those quotations and paraphrasings are essential. At the end of a sentence where a writer references another person's work, either through quotation, paraphrasing, or summarizing, the writer will insert a parenthetical citation, which allows a reader to find the original source document and read its material in context to determine its validity and value to the argument (Corrigan 162). The parenthetical citation is (usually) placed at the end of the sentence before the final period and includes the first few words of the source's entry on the works cited page followed by a space and then the page number of the referenced material; in the case of books or articles written by a single author, the parenthetical citation is merely the author's surname and the page number (Corrigan 166). Citations should be placed

"as near as possible to the material documented" (*MLA* 217). In the case of a Web-based document, the parenthetical citation consists solely of the author's surname or the first few distinguishing words of the title if no author is given (*MLA* 223-224). Page numbers are not used for web-based documents, and neither are paragraph numbers unless explicitly stated in the source document (221).

Perhaps most importantly, especially in terms of receiving credit for a paper, the writer needs to be sure to format the in-text citations properly and to allow readers to find the original source documents for any references made in the paper. Therefore, the writer will create a thorough and properly-formatted works-cited page. By including the works-cited page as a continuation of the paper, the header in the upper-right corner will included author's name and the proper page number. Additionally, the page will be titled Works Cited for clarity. Any works that the writer has quoted, paraphrased, or summarized in the body of the paper will be listed on the works-cited page, and they will be listed in alphabetical order, left-justified (all entries begin on the left margin), with a hanging-indent (any information that goes beyond one line will be indented) (*MLA* 130-131). This format allows for the portion of the citation that belongs in the in-text parenthetical citation to extend a little to the left, simplifying the reader's search for specific sources cited in the body of the paper. With a properly-formatted works-cited page, a reader will easily find all of the source texts used in the paper, which lends credibility to the writer and his stated position (assuming, of course, that he has understood the source material correctly and has used the material properly).

Once the preliminary effort of sorting through research material, selecting references, and planning out an argument is done, the hard work of writing the text begins; while the text of the paper is the most important piece for presenting an argument effectively, the format of the paper

can greatly influence the reader's reception of the writer's argument, and proper documentation ensures receiving credit and avoiding plagiarism issues. Poor formatting will inhibit the reader's understanding, but clear formatting will stay out of the reader's way, unnoticed, because the writer followed a few simple rules.

Works Cited

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