Introduction to MLA Documentation

Speaker: Kameo Keltner

In academic and professional writing, authors will use sources to support and inform their claims. However, each discipline will expect writers to follow specific practices when documenting sources. For example, those studying or working in the field of biology may follow the Council of Biology Editors (CBE) style; those in journalism may use the Associated Press (AP) Stylebook. Psychology tends to require writers to use the American Psychological Association (APA) documentation style.

Because the English discipline—along with some humanities disciplines—tends to require sources documented following the practices of the Modern Language Association (MLA), you will learn and use MLA style documentation practices in this class. Of course, as you continue taking classes in college, your professors may require you to use styles other than MLA style. Even though each style has different practices, once you learn the rules and practices for MLA style, and you become familiar with how and when to document sources, you should be able to use other styles with relative ease.

Your ability to document sources accurately will closely link with your use of the Rules for Writing handbook. As you begin to navigate the handbook, you should learn how to search out answers to your documentation questions, and be sure to remain in the MLA section of the handbook, as the text gives you guidance for APA, too.

When using sources in your writing, avoid plagiarism by accurately giving credit to all of your sources. As you learned in Learning Unit 1, plagiarism is a serious offense that can cause you to fail an assignment and even fail the course. Make sure that you understand proper documentation practices to avoid plagiarizing. In MLA documentation style, you will learn to cite sources using these key practices:

- In-text citations and signal phrases
- the Works Cited page
- Quotations
- Paraphrases
- Summaries

We will discuss summaries and paraphrases in more depth during Learning Unit 4. In this unit, we will focus mainly on paper format, in-text citations, signal phrases, the Works Cited page, and quotations.

Paper format guidelines for MLA style—including rules regarding spacing, pagination, margins, title, identifying information, etc.—may be found in Rules for Writers. Also, consult “MLA Paper Checklist” and “Sample Paper in MLA Style” (both available in LU02). MLA requires that writers format their essays in a specific manner, and your instructor expects you to follow this format for each essay assigned in the class.

In-text citations are used within your essay to document a source that you use. While the format for an in-text citation will vary depending on the type of source that you use, the basic format consists of the
author’s last name and the page number within parenthesis. For example, if the author’s name is Neil Postman and you use a passage from page 80 of his book, your in-text citation should look like this: (Postman 80). The handbook will serve as a valuable resource to you throughout this course and throughout your college education. This text will explain the format for the various types of sources that you need to document with within research papers.

Use **signal phrases** to introduce sources within your essay and to smoothly integrate the source passage into your prose. For example, if you use Neil Postman’s book, you could use a signal phrase to introduce this source and the source passage. It might look something like this: “According to Neil Postman in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* . . .”. The signal phrase is not the passage that you use from Neil Postman’s book; instead, the signal phrase simply gets the reader ready to read and process the passage from this source.

**The Works Cited** page contains a list of the sources you use in your essay. This page is separate from the rest of your essay, and it appears at the very end of your essay. List sources in alphabetical order according to the author’s last name (if the source has an author). Again, your handbook will be a vital resource to you as you compile your Works Cited page. Different types of source will require different citation formats. Be sure to read the handbook carefully while you work on the Works Cited page.

**Quotations** are the exact words in the exact sentence structures of a source. When you copy the words of an author exactly as they appear in the source, you should put these words within quotation marks. If you use a passage from Postman’s book, the words would appear within quotation marks. Here is an example of a quotation: “The television commercial is not at all about the character of products to be consumed. It is about the character of the consumers of products” (128). Notice that the in-text citation appears after the quotation. When exact words from a source are used without quotation marks, plagiarism has occurred.

Again, use your handbook to familiarize yourself with these practices. Even though we have just reviewed the key practices for documenting sources, you will encounter many variations to all of these rules and practices, depending on the type of source used and the length and the nature of the quotation used within your essay.

© Kameo Keltner and Indian Hills Community College