



Douglas College

Douglas College Learning Centre

## Citing Sources in MLA Style

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When you write an essay or a term paper in your college courses, you must show where the information that you used in the paper came from – that is, you must document all your sources. One of the most common ways to document these sources is to follow the guidelines published by the Modern Languages Association, guidelines known as “MLA Style.” MLA Style is most often used in English literature essays.

MLA Style involves two parts. First, in the body of your essay, you identify the authors of your sources followed by the page(s) you got the information from. You must provide this citation whether you are quoting, paraphrasing or summarizing another’s ideas. Second, you include an alphabetized list of all your sources on a separate page at the end of your paper. This is called the “Works Cited” page. In this style, the author’s last name and the page number in parentheses allow the reader to find the complete information about each source by looking up the author’s last name in the “Works Cited” list at the end of the paper.

This handout provides only a brief introduction to how to do MLA Style citations in your essay when you quote and/or paraphrase from sources. To find the range of details you will need when creating your Works Cited page, use other resources such as the Library’s MLA handouts, MLA web sites (which you can find on the Library web site), or the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*.

### Using Parentheses for Documenting Sources

Following MLA Style, you need to include two pieces of information in a sentence when you include someone else’s words, ideas, or facts in your writing.

a) the author's last name

b) the page number

Torvald betrays his mistrust of Nora when he asks if her “sweet tooth didn’t get the better” of her while she was shopping earlier (Ibsen 151).

Here are some options for doing citations:

a) If you are only using one source, you only need the page number in the parentheses:

In writing about literature, you will often focus your paper on only one literary source. When that's the case, introduce the author in your introductory paragraph, providing her/his full name, and then using only the surname in subsequent references. Then, following each detailed reference to the text (quoted or summarized), provide only the page number in parentheses.

So, if you had already told your reader earlier in the paper that you are writing about Ibsen's play, you should cite quotations from his play this way:

Torvald betrays his mistrust of Nora when he asks if her "sweet tooth didn't get the better" of her while she was shopping earlier (151).

b) When you are using more than one source, you need to repeat the author's name in the context of each quotation or paraphrase to help your reader know which text you are referring to. However, the author's name and page number can be presented in one of two ways:

i. You can include both the author's last name and the page number in parentheses after the information is given.

Torvald betrays his mistrust of Nora when he asks if her "sweet tooth didn't get the better" of her while she was shopping earlier (Ibsen 151).

ii. You can also split up the author's name and the page number so that the author's name is included in your sentence before the quotation, and the page number is in parentheses after the quotation:

Walker does not share this vision of feminist separatism: "a womanist person loves men sexually and/or nonsexually" (173).

## What should be documented?

Your essay or paper needs to have evidence, or support, or proof of the points you are making. The main evidence you use in a literature essay comes in the form of ideas or words from the text you are analyzing. Below is a list of the situations where you should acknowledge the sources of information you use. Discuss these situations with your tutor so you are clear on the differences.

A) WHEN QUOTING: if you quote an author's exact words

Walker states that "womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender," but does not stop at defining herself as a feminist (173).

B) WHEN PARAPHRASING: if you use your own words, but you use another author's ideas.

The aristocratic heroic and kinship values of Germanic society continued to inspire both clergy and laity during Christian times (Smith 323).

C) WHEN SUMMARIZING: if you summarize one or more points in another author's writing.

The Renaissance was seen as a time of upheaval of traditional art forms and societal values, paving the way for a more enlightened and broad view of the foreign world (Rahemtulla 988).

D) STATISTICS OR FACTS: if you use a fact or a statistic that is not common knowledge

The Dutch Crown's overseas territories were vastly increased in 1667 (Charland 301).

## Using Sources Well

Quotations and paraphrases in MLA Style are used to provide supporting evidence for your analysis of a text, but should not dominate your essay. Do not rely on your quotations to make your points for you. Generally, follow this pattern:

1. Introduce the quotation by explaining the context.  
You need to anticipate what information the reader will need for the quotation or paraphrase to make sense. For example, you might need to explain who is speaking, to whom, and what is happening at this point in the story.
2. Give the quotation or paraphrased information followed by the citation, keeping in mind that the quotation or paraphrase needs to be included as part of a complete sentence.
3. Analyze or interpret the quotation.  
Explain how the quotation supports the point you are making. Your reader expects you to offer some insight or draw a conclusion from cited material, so do not end a paragraph with quoted material. State why the quoted material matters to your essay.

**PRACTICE EXERCISE:** With your tutor, look at the following two examples. Discuss which of the two examples below uses sources in a better way, and explain your reasons.

**Example A:** Like Nowlan, Richards presents the land as hostile. When Vera goes into the forest to cut wood, she is overcome by “a strange feeling, as if the woods would come over her” (Richards 184). The threat Vera feels from the forest shows that the land is not just wild, but aggressively hostile.

**Example B:** Richards shows fate as a burden placed on future generations. Both Rita and Myhrra have the opportunity to achieve some kind of post-secondary education. We are told Myhrra “had almost gone to university” but decided to get married instead (23) while Rita attended a “teacher’s college – but ... left without her diploma” (Richards). This likely occurred because of her pregnancy.

### **Discussion of Examples:**

Example A clearly follows the pattern for using quotations effectively.

- i. A point is made – land is hostile
- ii. A quotation is introduced – the context of Vera going out to cut wood sets the scene for the quotation.
- iii. The quotation is included in the writer's sentence, which ends with a citation.
- iv. The writer discusses the quotation and connects it to the point made at the beginning – the land is threatening to Vera, it's hostile.

Example B has only some of the features of an effective use of the source.

- i. A point is made – fate is a burden for future generations
- ii. The quotations are introduced – Rita and Myhrra had an opportunity for education.
- iii. The quotations are included in the writer's sentence.

Example B's problems are:

- i. The connection between the quotations and the point being made is not developed.  
There is no analysis. The reader ends up confused about how this issue of the women's education relates to fate and future generations.
- ii. One of the citations does not include a page number.

**Pay attention “TO THE DETAILS” of Documenting Correctly**

Quote only the words or parts of an author's sentence that you want to emphasize. In the following example, there is no benefit to quoting the whole sentence:

The young believe “his physical prowess is prominent, emphasized by how his hands are strong” (Nowlan 510).

Quote only the important words, those you wish to emphasize, as in the following example:

Perhaps naively, the young believe that their strength is there, that their “hands are strong” (Nowlan 510).

**PUNCTUATION OF SHORT QUOTATIONS:** notice that in all of the quotations used above, the period at the end of each sentence comes **after** the parenthesis. Even if the phrase quoted ends with a period in the original, you must leave the period out if your sentence has not yet ended.

**Block Quotations:**

Occasionally, it is necessary to use long quotations. If a quotation is longer than **four (4)** lines, then you need to insert it differently, and punctuate it differently, than for shorter quotations. These longer quotations are called "Block Quotations." As in the following example, a block quotation is set off from your writing by **beginning a new line, indented one inch from the left margin** and **double-spaced**. Do not use quotation marks at the beginning or end of a block quotation:

Alice Walker tells of the loving creativity that infused her mother's domestic life:

I remember people coming to my mother's yard to be given cuttings from her flowers; I hear again the praise showered on her because whatever rocky soil she landed on, she turned into a garden . . . . [T]o this day people drive by our house in Georgia – perfect strangers and imperfect strangers – and ask to stand or walk among my mother's art. (240)

Clearly, creativity and art are not limited, in Walker's view, to the few forms of expression traditionally recognized, but must include more homely, humble and domestic forms of art which women create for themselves, their families and their communities.

Notice that for block quotations, the period at the end of the sentence comes **before** the page number in parentheses. Also note that your reader will expect you to offer some insight or analysis of the material just quoted. After the quotation, begin at the left margin again to complete your paragraph.

**Match the grammar, style and mechanics of the source to the requirements of your sentence**

When you integrate quotations into your writing, you need to pay attention to punctuation and grammar. You need to be careful to insert quotations and paraphrases smoothly into your writing so that the grammar matches.

To make a quotation match the grammar of the sentence into which you are inserting it, you can:

- 1) paraphrase most of the sentence

Torvald thinks of Nora as a “scatterbrain” and “featherbrain” (148), but we know she is actually quite clever.

- 2) use square brackets (to add any changes to the original)

Nora begs to be allowed to “let [herself] go just a little bit” (148) this year, but he thinks this attitude is unacceptable, and “just like a woman” (149).

- 3) use ellipsis, which means three periods with a space between each period (to leave out parts of the quotation that are not needed).

Note: do not use ellipsis before or after a quoted passage to mark its beginning or end; ellipsis should be used only when words are left out of the middle of a quotation.

Ezeudu’s funeral overtakes the village: “The ancient drums of death beat, . . . and men dashed about in a frenzy” (Achebe 121).

Note that the ellipsis is not really punctuation – it indicates only that words have been removed. If the phrase ending in an ellipsis also needs a comma, a period or other punctuation, that must be added as well.

**Using an original source that you found in a secondary source:**

What do you do if you want to use a quotation or a statistic that an author borrowed from another original source that you do not have?

Use “qtd. in” in the parentheses before the citation to show in which secondary source you found the quotation or statistic. For example, if you read an article by Kimmel, and you find information about a study by Kohen cited in Kimmel’s article, then your reference to these authors should appear like this:

In a five-year study, Kohen found that one out of four middle-aged men changed jobs near retirement (qtd. in Kimmel 301).

**Multiple Authors**

For co-author situations, if there are two or three authors, include all of the authors' last names in the citation. If there are more than three authors, provide the first author's last name, followed by the abbreviation “*et al.*” (which is a short form for a Latin expression which means “and others.” Notice that you need to put “*et al.*” in italics because it comes from another language).

For example, with a multiple-Author Source, rather than write:  
     Smith, Barnes, Kohen, and Sekon provide examples of . . .  
 simply write:  
     Smith *et al.* provide examples of. . .

**Creating the “Works Cited” page at the end of your paper**

This handout does not cover the details of creating “Works Cited” pages. Because you will be using so many different possible kinds of sources, you need to use an MLA Style guide to create “Works Cited” pages. You can find very good manuals online (for example, go to the Douglas College Library web site and open the [Citation and Style Guides](#) link). You can also go to the Library or the Learning Centre to get handouts, or to look at a complete MLA Style manual.