

409 COMMENTS

# MLA Style Papers: Step-by-step Instructions for Formatting Research Papers

Posted by Dennis G. Jerz, on May 29th, 2011

[Jerz](#) > [Writing](#) > [Academic](#) >

0.1) If you've been asked to submit a paper in MLA format, your instructor is asking you to format the page and present the content in a specific way. Just as football referees dress a certain way, and Japanese chefs cook a certain way, writers in certain disciplines follow a certain set of conventions, known as MLA format or MLA style. This document will show you how to format a paper in MLA style.

0.2) If, instead of questions about format, you have questions about why and how to write an academic paper, see instead my handouts on [writing a short research paper](#), [coming up with a good thesis statement](#), and [using quotations in the body of your paper](#).

0.3) On this page:

1. **Document Settings**  
(1 inch margins; double spaced; 12-point)
2. **Page Header**  
(name and page number, upper right of every page)
3. **Title Block**  
(assignment info and an informative title)
4. **Citations**  
(no comma between the author and page number; commas and periods go outside of inline quotes)
5. **Works Cited List**  
(lots of tricky details! sort alphabetically by author, *not* by the order the quotes appear in your paper)

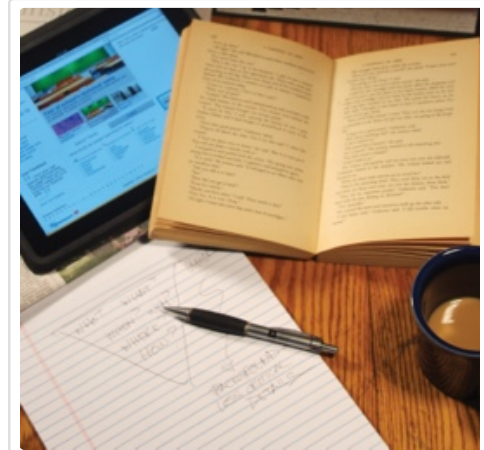
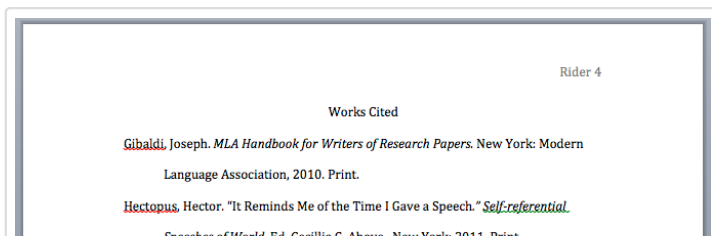
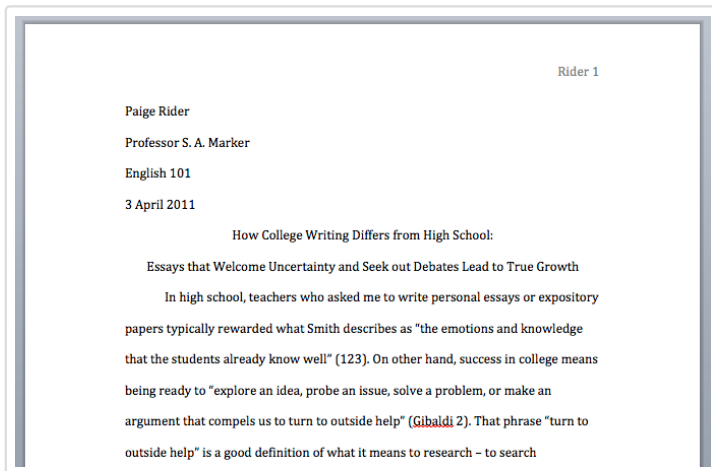


Photo: Bruce Siskawicz

For the most complete information, check your campus library or writing center for the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* 7th ed.



Russell, Tony, Allen Brizze, Elizabeth Angeli, and Russell Keck. "MLA Works Cited Page: Basic Format." *Purdue OWL*. Purdue University. Web. 30 Mar. 2011.

Smith, Harriet. "Titles of Journal Articles Go in Quotes." *Name of the Journal* 12.1 (2010): 34-56. Web. 30 Mar. 2011.

## 1. Document Settings

Your word processor comes with default settings (margin, line height, paragraph spacing, and typeface) that will likely need adjustment. For MLA style, you need:

1. 1-inch margins all around
2. 2.0 line height (double-spaced)
3. no extra spacing after paragraphs
4. 12-point typeface (usually Times New Roman)

(Jump directly to instructions for adjusting MS-Word settings in [Windows](#) or [Mac](#); or, skip ahead to [2\) Page Header](#).)

### 1.1 Adjusting Document Settings in MS-Word (Windows)

My copy of Microsoft Word for Windows defaults to

1. 1-inch margins all around
2. 1.15 line height
3. 10pt spacing between paragraphs
4. Calibri 11-point typeface.

#### Changing to MLA Style (Windows)

1. The default margins in my test run were fine, but if you need to change them:  
**Page Layout -> Margins -> Normal** (1-inch all around)
2. The default line height is too low. Change it to 2.0.  
**Home -> Line Spacing -> 2.0.**  
(You could try fudging it to 1.9 or 2.1 to meet a page count, but any more than that and your instructor may notice.)
3. The MS-Word default adds extra space after paragraphs. (MLA Style instead requires you to signal paragraph breaks by indenting the first line.)  
**CTRL-A** (select all your text)  
**Home -> Line Spacing -> Remove Space After Paragraph**
4. Change the typeface to Times New Roman 12-point.  
**Home -> Font Face Selector** (change to Times New Roman)  
**Home -> Font Size Selector** (change to 12)

### 1.2 Adjusting Document Settings in MS-Word (Mac)

My copy of Microsoft Word for Mac defaults to

1. 1.25 inch left and right margins, 1 inch top and bottom
2. 1.0 line height
3. no extra spacing after paragraphs
4. Cambria 12-point typeface

#### Changing to MLA style (Mac)

1. In my test run, the left and right margins are too big. To change them:  
**Layout -> Margins -> Normal** (1-inch all around)

2. The default line height is too low. Change it to 2.0.  
**Home -> Line Spacing -> 2.0**
3. My Mac copy of MS-Word does not add extra spaces after paragraphs. If yours does:  
**Home -> Line Spacing -> Line Spacing Options...** (a new window will pop up)  
**Don't add space between paragraphs of the same style** (check this box) -> **OK**
4. The 12-point Cambria will probably be fine, but to change the typeface:  
**Home -> Font Face Selector** (change to Times New Roman)  
**Home -> Font Size Selector** (change to 12)

## 2. Page Header

In the top right of every page, use your word processor's "Page Header" function add an automatic page number and your surname.

### 2.1 Adding the Page Header in MS-Word (Windows)

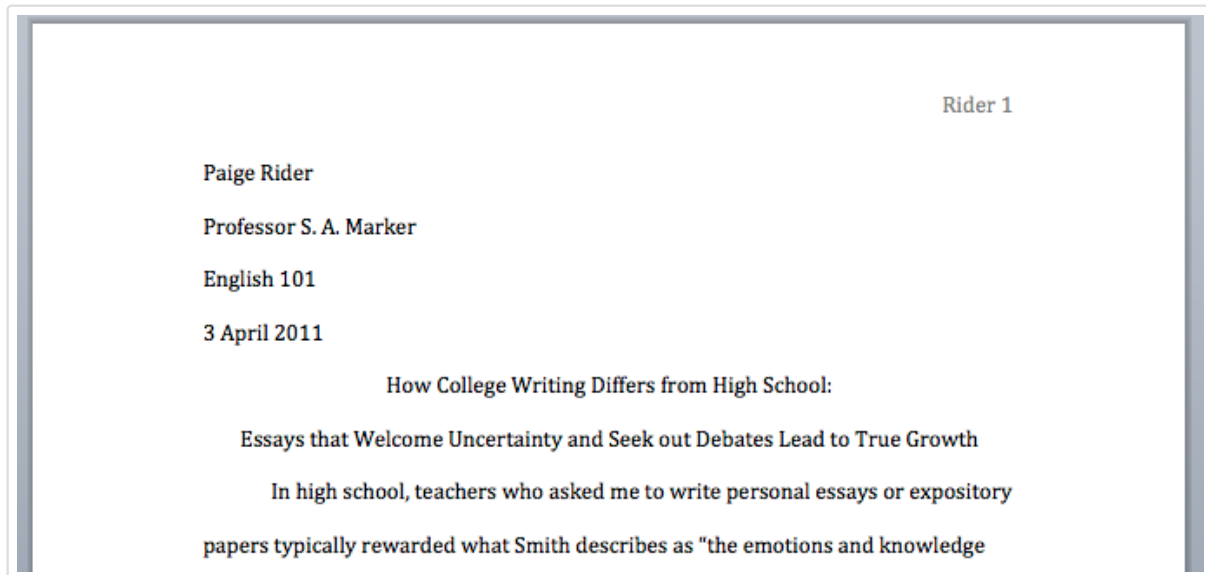
1. **Insert -> Page Number -> Top of Page ->** (choose the right-justified "Plain Number" option)
2. The cursor will jump automatically to the right place for you to **type your surname**.
3. Click anywhere in the body of the paper to exit the header area.

### 2.2 Adding the Page Header in MS-Word (Mac)

1. **Insert** (in the top menu) -> **Page Numbers...** -> (Set "Position" to "Top of Page (header)" and "Alignment" to "Right")
2. Click **just to the left** of the new page number, and **type your surname**.
3. On my test document, my name was too far over to the left: **grab the triangular tab adjuster** just above your name, and **drag it a notch to the right**.

## 3. Title Block

In the upper left corner, type your name, your instructor's name, the course number and section, and today's date. Centered on the next line, type an informative title that actually informs the reader of your main point (not just "English Paper" or "A Comparison between Hamlet and Macbeth").



- Like all the other text in an MLA style paper, the **title block is double-spaced**.
- The **title is in the same font** as the rest of the paper — it is not boldface, or enlarged.
- There is **no extra space above or below** the title.
- A truly informative title will include **the general topic, and your precise opinion** on that topic. (So, if you plan to compare Hamlet and Macbeth, your title should state the unique point you want to make about Hamlet and Macbeth. Reuse part of your thesis statement.)

## 4. Citations

This handout presumes you already know why you should cite your sources (to establish your authority, to introduce persuasive evidence, to avoid plagiarism, etc.). These instructions focus on how you format the page. (For a resource to help you determine how to cite a specific source, see the [MLA Bibliography Builder](#)).

To fully cite a source requires two stages. The first happens in the body of your paper (the “in-text citation”) and the second happens in a list at the of your paper (see “Works Cited List,” below.)

#### 4.1 Citing a Block Quote (more than three lines)

sexist. But a college research paper asks me to go beyond what I already feel, and explore what I don't know. In the context of a college writing class, that means finding and citing credible sources.

Giving full credit to the sources of the ideas you drew on in your research is a vital component of an academic paper. Accurate, smooth citations are the lifeblood of an MLA paper. Together, the in-text citations and the Works Cited list establish your solid research methods and your academic integrity, thereby avoiding plagiarism. (Wordsworth-Fuller 20)

For example, I know what I think about a hijab, but I've never actually worn one, or even talked with someone who wears one. If, rather than thinking of my task as

- Long quotes can start to look like filler. Only use a block quote if you have a very good reason to include the whole passage. (You can usually make your point with a shorter quote.)
- If you do have a good reason to quote a passage that is several lines long:
  - Select the text and click the “**Increase Indent**” icon (see image, right).
  - Place the **parenthetical citation** (the author's name and the page number) **after the period**. (This is different from inline quotes, below.)
  - There is **no comma** between the author's name and the page number.
  - If the quotation runs across more than one page: (Wordsworth-Fuller 20-21) or (Wordsworth-Fuller 420-21).
- Skip wordy introductions such as, “In his informative guide *The Amazing Writing Book*, published by Elizabeth Mount College in 2010, the noted composition expert Maxwell Wordsworth-Fuller describes the importance of citations in MLA style papers.” Cutting the filler leaves more room to develop your own original ideas. (See “[Integrating Quotations](#).”)



#### 4.2 Citing an Inline Quotation

When the passage you want to quote is less than three lines long, use inline style. Here we have two brief passages, taken from the same page of the same source, so we can handle both with a single parenthetical citation.

sexist. But a college research paper asks me to go beyond what I already feel, and explore what I don't know. In the context of a college writing class, that means “[g]iving full credit to the sources of the ideas you drew on in your research,” in order to “establish your solid research methods and your academic integrity” (Wordsworth-Fuller 20). For example, I know what I think about a hijab, but I've never actually worn one, or even talked with someone who wears one. If, rather than thinking of my task as expressing my pre-existing opinion on hijab, I set out to

- The **parenthetical citation** appears outside the quoted material.
- The period that ends the sentence comes **after the close parenthesis**. (This is different from block quotes, above.)
- In this example, we have changed the first word a little, lowercasing it in order to fit it into our own sentence. To let the reader know what we changed, we put [] around it.

- Again, note the absence of a full sentence that explains who Wordsworth-Fuller is and where the quote comes from. All that info will be in the Works Cited list, so we leave it out of the body of the paper.

### 4.3 Citing a Paraphrase

Let's imagine we want to reference Wordsworth-Fuller's general idea about citation as a way to establish credibility, but we don't need to include any of the technical details. We can save space, and make it much easier on our reader, if we paraphrase:

sexist. But a college research paper asks me to go beyond what I already feel, and explore what I don't know. In the context of a college writing class, we demonstrate our trustworthiness by citing our sources (Wordsworth-Fuller 20). For example, I know what I think about a hijab, but I've never actually worn one, or even talked

- Use paraphrasing for variety, or to **make a passing reference** without taking up much space.
- If we use an author's idea, **rephrased in our own words, we must still cite** the idea.

## 5. Works Cited List

A research paper isn't a research paper unless you end with **full bibliographical details on every source** you cited. This part can be tedious and tricky; leave yourself plenty of time to do it.

Rider 4

Works Cited

Gibaldi, Joseph. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. New York: Modern Language Association, 2010. Print.

Hectopus, Hector. "It Reminds Me of the Time I Gave a Speech." *Self-referential Speeches of World*. Ed. Cecillia C. Above. New York: 2011. Print.

Russell, Tony, Allen Brizee, Elizabeth Angeli, and Russell Keck. "MLA Works Cited Page: Basic Format." *Purdue OWL*. Purdue University. Web. 30 Mar. 2011.

Smith, Harriet. "Titles of Journal Articles Go in Quotes." *Name of the Journal* 12.1 (2010): 34-56. Web. 30 Mar. 2011.

- **Start a new page.**
  - MS-Word Wind: Insert -> Page Break -> New Page.
  - MS-Word Mac: Document Elements -> Break -> Page.
- **Title** your new page: Works Cited  
 MLA style calls for **no extra spaces above or below** the page title; no special formatting.

### 5.1. How to Create an Individual Works Cited Entry

Exactly what goes into each item in your bibliography depends on what kind of item it is. The following pages give you some question to answer, then let you push a button to get an individual works-cited entry.

[MLA-Style Bibliography Builder: Create Works Cited Entries by Filling in a Form](#)

- Article (in a periodical, or chapter; printed or electronic)
- Book (printed or electronic)
- Web Page (corporate web page, blog entry, YouTube video, etc.)

If you prefer a more narrative explanation, see Purdue OWL's handouts for how to create a bibliography entry for a book, an article in

a [periodical](#) (such as a journal or newspaper), or an [electronic source](#) (such as an email, web page or a YouTube clip). See also this list of [other common sources](#) (such as a personal interview or a movie).

## 5.2. How to Organize Your Works Cited list

Sort the entries **alphabetically by the author's** last name.

- If the author is an organization (such as a government agency or non-profit foundation), alphabetize **according to the name of the organization**.
- If you are citing a painting, or a composer, then obviously "author" has to be interpreted a little loosely.

Unless your instructor ask you to organize your Works Cited list differently, **everything should be alphabetized together, in a single list**. MLA does *not* require that you separate works of different kinds, or that you cite works in the order that they appeared in your paper, or that you write annotations to go along with each item.

*29 May 2011 — new document posted, replacing outdated handout written in 1999.*

*06 Jun 2011 — expanded section on organizing the Works Cited list, since several readers asked for clarification.*

*07 Jun 2011 — reorganized for emphasis*

*19 Apr 2012 — added numbers to more subheads*

### Related Writing Links

Dennis G. Jerz

#### **Researched Papers: Using Quotations Effectively**

If your college instructor wants you to cite every fact or opinion you find in an outside source, how do you make room for your own opinion? Paraphrase, quote selectively, and avoid summary. Dennis G. Jerz

#### **MLA Works Cited Citation Builder**

Choose a form, fill it out, and push the button... you will get an individual entry for a "Works Cited" page, which you may then copy and paste into your word processor. The BibBuilder is more like a guide than a full-fledged utility, but you may nevertheless find it helpful.

[Jerz's Literacy Weblog](#)

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Last reply was 19 hours ago

1.



*Tahseen*

View [22 hours ago](#)

Thank you so much for this. I'm really grateful that there are people like you out there who help others out like this :)

May Allah / God bless you :)


[Reply](#)

2. Works Cited Notes – Seminar in Thinking and Writing (LA101)

View [11 hours ago](#)


[...] MLA Style Papers (with specific instructions that demonstrate the format for a WC list) [...]

[Reply](#)

3.  Desiree  
View [15 hours ago](#)


Thank you so much!!! I couldn't figure out how to do this for nothing and I had begun to get points taken off of my papers.

[Reply](#)

4.  nickolas sarmiento  
View [10 hours ago](#)


i need help on finding indenting

[Reply](#)

- o  Dennis G. Jerzreplied:  
View [10 hours ago](#)


Nickolas, if there's a particular instruction on this page that you find confusing, I'd be happy to help clarify, but as it is there isn't enough information in your request for me to be very helpful.

[Reply](#)

5.  nickolas sarmiento  
View [10 hours ago](#)


i need help on finding indenting  
help me plz

[Reply](#)

6.  nickolas sarmiento  
View [10 hours ago](#)


hi

[Reply](#)

7.  Sherry  
View [10 hours ago](#)


That was great...cannot say much.I have been struggling.

[Reply](#)

8.  zackline mendy  
View [1 hour 6 minutes ago](#)


need help with mla formatting for my English class

[Reply](#)

- o  Dennis G. Jerzreplied:  
View [5 minutes ago](#)


You've found the right web page, then. Let me know if any of the guidelines are unclear.

[Reply](#)

9.  MARIA  
View [11 hours ago](#)

THANKS


[Reply](#)

10.  Shellie Rourke  
View [20 hours ago](#)

That was a huge help for my final paper...thank you


[Reply](#)



11.  *Miri gavrieli-Hod*  
View [5 hours ago](#)


Thank you so much. Your information to me waslike a blessing in th sky... Thanks and God bless.

[Reply](#)

12.  ***EILEEN HALL***  
View [22 hours ago](#)

I could use your help in writting a term papper on the history and culture of the Cherrokee Indians. I need ; Journal Articles, ten Bibliography's two books ten sources 30 notecards on this subject, two outlines. One rough draft andthe final outline. I have never written a term paper before, I need some serious help. Will you help me PLEASE!!

[Reply](#)

- o  ***Dennis G. Jerz***replied:  
View [19 hours ago](#)

See the links in section 0.2. I'm sure your instructor would be able to help, if you ask.

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