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January 24, 2020

All (or Nearly All) About MLA Formatting

This page both explains and demonstrates the primary page set-up parameters for an MLA-formatted essay, according to the latest edition of the *MLA Handbook* (8th edition, 2016). That is to say, this document gives instructions for how to create an MLA-formatted paper, and it shows you what an essay following those instructions should look like. All instructions assume that you're using Microsoft Word, but the commands in most other word-processing programs are similar.

First, "select" the entire document (from the "Editing" tab in the upper right corner of the toolbars above) so that your formatting changes will be applied to the entire document. Next, select the "Paragraph" menu and set to double spacing. While you're there, make sure "Alignment" is set to "Left": the entire essay must be left-justified (not full-justified). This means that the left-hand edge of your type is perfectly straight but the right-hand edge is uneven. While you're in this menu, too, be sure the box labeled "Don't add space between paragraphs of the same style" is checked. This command will prevent MSWord from automatically adding extra spaces between paragraphs. Save your changes.

Still in the "Home" tab, in the "Font" menu this time, choose a normal font (like Times New Roman or Courier or Arial), "Regular" font style, and font size 10, 11, or 12.

Next, go to the "Page Layout" tab choose "Margins," and set to one (1) inch, all the way around (left & right, top and bottom). That does it for basic page set-up.

To insert a running header with your name and page number, choose the "Insert" tab and look for "Page Number." Choose "Top of Page" from the menu and click on the option for the upper righthand corner of the header. Once you've inserted the page number, type your name

and a single space before the number. Make sure the font you're using in the header matches the size and type of the font in the main text of your essay. If the header is set correctly, your typing should appear ½ inch from the top of the page—midway down the one-inch top margin—and flush with the right margin. If it doesn't, use the "Header and Footer" menu to adjust the vertical placement of the header within the margin.

Note the four-line heading at the top left of the first page. Unless your instructor gives you alternative instructions, follow the example exactly. No title page is necessary.

Note also the title, centered and double-spaced, with major words capitalized, but otherwise in normal typeface—no all-caps; no boldface; no italics, no quotation marks.

The entire essay must be double-spaced—even the parts that you don't think should be double-spaced. Notice the headings and title at the top of the page: they're double-spaced. Block quotations? Double-spaced. Works Cited entries? Double-spaced. *Everything* is double-spaced—no exceptions.

A new paragraph is indented one standard tab-space: five spaces or, more precisely, one-half inch. No extra spaces between paragraphs because—you guessed it—*everything* is double-spaced. (As I wrote earlier, check the box labeled "Don't add space between paragraphs of the same style" in the "Paragraph" menu to prevent MSWord from adding extra spaces between paragraphs.)

So much for formatting. Yes, it's a pain. But correct formatting sends a clear message to your readers that you know what you're doing and therefore that the content of your writing should be taken seriously. The more formatting mistakes you make, the more likely it becomes that readers will assume the opposite: that you *don't* know what you're doing and therefore that they should *not* take your writing seriously. Fairly or not, that's a cue to readers that they really don't need to pay much attention to whatever your essay is trying to communicate, because its content is likely to show the same sloppiness and lack of seriousness that the formatting does. In other words, your handling of the technicalities of formatting directly effects your audience's

perception of your authority as a writer.

One essential element of any essay in literary analysis or interpretation is quotation and citation of outside sources, whether they are primary sources (a novel, story, poem, play or other work about which you are writing) or secondary sources (an essay, historical document, book, website, or other work whose words and/or ideas you're citing in support of your argument).

A short prose quotation, one that is four or fewer typewritten lines long, should be handled as an embedded quotation, indicated by quotation marks but run in with the typography of your sentence as though all the words in the sentence are your own. This sentence is an example: noted grammarian Joe Blow notes that “embedded quotations must function grammatically and mechanically in a sentence as though they are not quotations at all, but simply a part of the sentence in which they appear” (47).

Longer prose quotations, ones that are more than four typewritten lines long, should be formatted as block quotations instead of embedded quotations. MLA scholar Anita Lotta Trivia says this about the use of block quotations:

Quoted material that amounts to more than four lines of typewritten text in your document should appear as a block quote—like this one— instead of an embedded quote. Block quotes appear without quotation marks, because the block itself indicates that the material is a quotation. Block quotes retain a normal (one-inch) right margin, but their left margin is an extra half inch from the margin. This is a change from previous editions of the *MLA Handbook*, which instructed writers to indent block quotations one full inch from the left margin. (872)

Your decision about whether to use a block quotation or an embedded quotation should be based on the number of typewritten lines in the quotation *as it appears in your essay*, not as it appears in the source.

Never leave a quotation “dangling” at the end of your paragraph; don’t give “the other

guy” the last word in your paragraph. Instead, use your sentences after a quotation to explain to your readers exactly how you want them to understand the quoted material so that it supports whatever point you're trying to make. If it doesn't do so, then you shouldn't be quoting it.

Now look back at the preceding paragraphs about quotations. Notice the source citations: the parenthetical information giving author and page information about the sources I have quoted. The first citation (three paragraphs back from here) includes only the page number of the source material, because the sentence itself identified the author. If the sentence had not identified Joe Blow as the quotation's source (as in the following clause), “then the end-of-sentence source citation and punctuation would look like this instead” (Blow 47). Note, too, that punctuation at the end of the block quote (two paragraphs back from here) differs from that of an embedded quotation: for embedded quotations, punctuation occurs after the citation, but in block quotations, punctuation occurs before the citation. Just as in the embedded quotation, had the author not been named in the “signal” sentence before the block quote, the author's last name would need to be included in the in-text citation.

Formatting and citation of poetry and drama work a little differently from prose. First, the rule for deciding between an embedded or a block quotation differs for poetry from prose, in two different ways. When quoting poetry, use a block quotation when you quote *more than three lines* of poetry (as opposed to more than four lines of prose). Count lines of poetry *as they appear in the source* (as opposed to their appearance in your document, for prose quotations). Lines of poetry must be capitalized and punctuated exactly as they appear in the source poem, just as the following three lines of poetry do: “Poetic quotes appear / With line breaks indicated by a slash / Just like those shown here for these three lines” (Opus, “Poetic,” lines 14-17).

Note the extra information in that last citation. It's there for two reasons: because one should cite poetry by line number rather than page, and because this essay also includes “another quotation / By the same poet writ / But taken from a second poem” (Opus, *Rhyming*, 7-10). Because the essay cites two different works by a single author, the parenthetical citations

must indicate which of the two works the quotation comes from. If your essay included only one work by the author Magnum Q. Opus, then the work's title would be omitted from the parenthetical reference. Note also that the second instance of poetic quotation omits the word "lines" from the citation; once is enough to establish the pattern for readers. Notice, too, that the title information in each of these two citations is formatted differently from the other. That's because the first quotation comes from a short work (a lyric poem, in this case) and therefore appears in quotation marks, while the latter quotation is taken from a long work (a book-length poem) and therefore appears in italics. The rules for formatting quotations from plays are similar in their logic, but would take too much space to demonstrate here, so see the *MLA Handbook* for further instructions.

This document outlines most of the greatest hits of MLA: rules for the formatting and citation feats that you'll need to perform most regularly. The Works Cited page that follows doesn't refer to works (real or imagined) that were actually cited in the body of this essay. Instead, it includes one example of each of the kinds of sources you are most likely to use in a literary studies essay. More information about constructing a Works Cited page can be found in the *English@SCSU Bluebook*, Buley Library's "MLA Style Guide" (which is linked from the "Research Guides" menu on the library website), and straight from the source: the MLA website: <https://style.mla.org/formatting-papers/>. See especially the "Sample Papers in MLA Style" link and the paper there labeled "Fourth-Year Course in English Literature." English majors and graduate students should consider buying their own copies of the latest edition of the *MLA Handbook* (the 8th, at the time of this writing) and get in the habit of consulting it routinely.

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