

2005 Research Paper Writing Tips Series:

# MLA Research Paper Writing Tips

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The Office of Black Student Affairs  
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This guide is based on the MLA (Modern Language Association) style format outlined in Diana Hacker's *A Writer's Reference* (Fifth Edition); if your field or professor suggests another style, consult a writer's reference guide.

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## FONT & FONT SIZE

Times New Roman, Arial or Verdana are the most generally used fonts. Make sure your font is no larger than 12-point.

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## HEADINGS

MLA neither encourages nor discourages the use of headings and currently provides no guidelines for their use. If you would like to insert headings in a long essay or research paper, check first with your instructor. Although headings are not used as frequently in English and the humanities as in other disciplines, the trend seems to be changing.

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## INDENTING

Do not indent the first line of each works cited entry, but indent any additional lines one-half inch (or five spaces). This technique highlights the names of the authors, making it easy for readers to scan the alphabetized list.

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## INTRODUCTION/CONCLUSION

Make sure these are at least a page each. In your introduction you should state your thesis statement, what you are going to discuss in your paper, and why it is important. In your conclusion you should summarize your main points and arguments (restating your thesis statement), and briefly position your paper's potential applications in a larger context.

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## LINE SPACING

Double-space throughout the paper. Do not add extra line spaces above or below the title of the paper or between paragraphs.

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## MARGINS AND PARAGRAPH INDENTS

Leave one inch margins on all sides of the page. Do not justify (align) the right margin. Indent the first line of each paragraph one-half inch (or five spaces) from the left margin.

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## PAGINATION

Put the page number preceded by your last name in the upper right corner of each page, one-half inch below the top edge. Use arabic numerals (1, 2, 3, and so on).

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## TITLE PAGE

MLA Style does not require a title page. On the top left hand of your first page write your name, instructor's names, course title, and date on separate lines. Center your title.

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## TITLE & IDENTIFICATION

MLA does not require a title page. On the first page of your paper, place your name, your instructor's name, the course title, and the date on separate lines against the left margin. Then center your title. If your instructor requires a title page, ask for guidelines on formatting it.

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## **VISUALS**

MLA classifies visuals as tables and figures (figures include graphs, charts, maps, photographs, and drawings). Label each table with an arabic numeral (Table 1, Table 2, and so on) and provide a clear caption that identifies the subject. The label and caption should appear on separate lines above the table, flush left. Below the table, give its source in a note like this one:

Source: John M. Vilanti, "Cellular Phones and Fatal Traffic Collisions," Accident Analysis and Prevention 30 (1998):521.

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## **MLA CITATION STYLES**

For the reference section of your paper, alphabetize entries in the list of works cited by authors' last names (if a work has no author, alphabetize it by its title).

### **BASIC TEXT FORMAT & TEXT BY THE SAME AUTHOR**

Thompson, Robert Farris. Flash of the Spirit: Afro-American Art & Philosophy. New York: Vintage Books, 1984.

### **EDITED TEXT WITH MULTIPLE EDITORS**

Morley, David, and Kuan-Hsing Chen, eds. Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies. New York: Routledge, 1996.

### **WEBSITE DOCUMENT**

Little, W. Africana Studies at the Crossroads. 5 June 2001. 17 Aug. 2001. Africana.com. <<http://www.africana.com/articles/02jun/crossroads.htm>>

### **JOURNAL PAGINATED BY VOLUME**

Kelley, Robin. "African Diaspora Revisited." African Studies Review 14 (2001): 26-85.

### **ARTICLE IN MONTHLY MAGAZINE**

Smith, Bomani D. "An Evening with Aaron McGruder." Essence Feb. 2002: 50-53.

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## **IN-TEXT CITATION EXAMPLES**

### **LONG QUOTES**

Quotations that are longer than four typed lines or three lines of verse are considered long quotes. When writing a long quote indent the whole quotation ten spaces (or a full inch) from the left. Double space the quotation.

**Dickerson (2000) reported the following:**

**Dr. Cheikh Anta Diop is considered to be the most respected scholar on Kemet. An Egyptologist and linguist, he had the revolutionary idea to use the scientific method to disprove the many myths surrounding ancient Kemet. He developed a way to test the levels of melanin in Egyptian mummies, which revealed that the ancient Egyptians were, indeed, Africans. He also argued that the Egyptian language was related to African dialects and can be connected to the Wolof language of today. By far, the most important theory that he sought to prove was that human life began in Africa. (249) (Double-space after quote)**

## SHORT QUOTES

Use quotation marks for the quote, site the author in the introductory sentence, and put the page number in parentheses at the end of the quotation.

**According to Clarke “the Black Studies Movement was a project designed to overthrow the curriculum of white supremacy, which in turn led to the African Centered project,” (23). *If author’s name is not introduced before the quote, use at the end of the quotation: (Clarke 23).***

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### TIPS

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- 1) Don’t edit your paper while you write. Editing too early can stifle your creativity. Edit after you have written your paper, proofread after you have edited (read aloud after you’ve typed it and you **WILL** find more errors).
- 2) Limit your Internet sources for your research paper to about 2 or 3 references and keep the bulk of your research textual. Internet sources are usually a bit difficult to verify (especially after they have been pulled down from their URL address) and are still considered less reputable than text references.
- 3) Write your introductions and conclusions after the body of your paper is written, this will allow you to keep up with the changes you’ll make while you are writing your paper.
- 4) Start your assignment as early as possible so that you can break your paper into small parts rather than writing it all at once.
- 5) Try not to write the way you speak. Commas, periods, colons, and semi-colons are not used the same way in common speech. Also, research word definitions rather than assume their accuracy based on how they sound. In other words, don’t use words because they sound “intelligent” (**most professors hate this**); just make sure your argument is clear.
- 6) Remember, your writing will improve the more you read, so read constantly. **READING IMPROVES WRITING!!!**
- 7) Always proofread your paper. Print out your paper and read it aloud **s-l-o-w-l-y**. This will help you catch grammar and spelling errors (spell-check doesn’t catch everything!).
- 8) Refrain from making absolute statements. Allow for the possibility of other ideas and approaches, whether you are aware of them or not.
- 9) Do not write to fill space, make sure quotes are explained after using them; and make sure they support your argument!
- 10) It doesn’t hurt to give yourself a few days to think about your paper, and re-edit it, after you’ve written it. Also, a fresh “pair of eyes” can help you catch errors, so develop an editing team of professional and peers.
- 11) Spell-check does not pick up certain words, here are a few: **too, to, their, they’re, there, four, for, one, and on**. So make sure you are using the proper word for what you are trying to write.
- 12) Use commas sparingly, especially with coordinating conjunctions like **and, but, or, nor, for, so, and yet**.