The Basics of MLA Documentation

This paper is a simplified guide to documenting sources correctly. It includes the following sections:

- 1. Why should I cite material?
- 2. When should I cite material?
- 3. When should I quote directly?
- 4. Whom should I cite?
- 5. What should I cite?
- 6. Where should my documentation appear?
- 7. **How** should I cite the sources I have used?
 - a) How do I use parenthetical citations?
 - b) How do I integrate quotations?
 - c) How do I paraphrase correctly and effectively?
- 8. What if I forget how to cite a source correctly?

1. Why should I cite (provide references for) material?

First, you want to provide references for sources that you have used in your writing because it is the ethical thing to do. It is not fair to use anyone else's words and/or ideas as if they were your own. Second, by citing these sources, you are telling your audience that you have researched your topic, and you give the immediate impression of increased credibility. Finally, you are entering into a particular discipline or academic endeavor by using and documenting sources, and, therefore, you are gaining experience as a scholar. Failure to cite sources correctly can lead to charges of plagiarism, which has a variety of consequences (academic ones—such as a zero on a paper or expulsion from an educational institution, professional ones—such as being fired from a place of employment, or credibility issues—loss of trust in you by your reader). For a full description of academic dishonesty and plagiarism, see www.athabascau.ca/studserv/inthonesty.htm

2. When should I cite material?

You do not have to cite items of common knowledge, such as the establishment of the Dominion of Canada in 1867 or the fact that many people have dogs as pets. However, if you are not sure that what you are talking about is common knowledge (e.g., most Albertans are in favor of granting legitimacy to same sex unions), support the material with a source. Be sure to document any material that indicates an opinion, an interpretation, or anything debatable.

3. When should I quote directly?

You should quote when something is particularly well said, or when you want to draw on the authority of the speaker as a recognized expert in the field, or when paraphrasing (restating in your own words) would be difficult because the idea is so plainly said in the first place. For example, it is unlikely that the quotation "Crime rates have decreased" could be restated more clearly or simply. In some disciplines, such as literature, quotations are used frequently to support interpretations of a primary text, whereas in other disciplines, such as sociology, most of the material is paraphrased because the sources are studies and not primary texts.

4. Whom should I cite (i.e., whose sources should I use)?

Everyone whose work you use should be cited, of course, but you may need to *evaluate* whether the source should be used. You want to use sources by credible authors, preferably experts in the field or eye-witnesses.

As you are likely aware, not all sources are credible and valuable for your research.

1) Authors. Authors should be recognized experts in their field. A doctorate or a designation of M.D. is not enough on its own to ensure a credible source, since certainly not all those holding advanced degrees are respected experts. For example, in 1990, a professor at the University of Alberta published a paper in which he "proved" that students who grow up in two career families are more likely to cheat in their university courses. However, he was a chemistry and physics professor who had no training in sociology, and his bibliography contained only articles he himself authored. Therefore, he was not a credible source for a paper on the effects two working parents have on their children, and an outraged scientific community demanded that the journal print an apology for publishing the article in the next issue.

If you are not sure that an author is an expert, do some research to find out what else he or she has published and whether other experts refer to the author.

Articles without authors can be credible sources, if there is clearly a legitimate group taking responsibility for the material (such as a medical board).

- 2) Books. Ensure that the research that appears is sound and that it has been properly documented throughout. Be aware that even the newest books are often out of date on current issues because it can take years for a finished manuscript to go from the author to a finished product on a shelf. If you are doing research on a current topic, you would be wiser to choose journal articles instead.
- 3) Journals and other periodicals. Make sure you are using journals, preferably peer-reviewed (which means the articles have been approved by experts other than the author before they are printed), rather than magazines intended for non-academic audiences. If you are unsure whether the periodical you wish to use is scholarly, you can follow the guidelines given on Cornell University's site called "Distinguishing Scholarly Journals from Other Periodicals" at www.library.cornell.edu/okuref/research/skill20.html
 For example, you should choose an article on treatment for anorexia appearing in The International Journal of Psychology, which is peer-reviewed, rather than one from Psychology Today or People magazine, which is not intended for academic research.

Additional tips for evaluating Internet sources

Because material on the Internet can be produced by anyone with rudimentary computer skills, you need to be more careful when using this kind of source than in using most others. While there is excellent research available, there is also much misinformation and biased opinions.

Here are some warning signs that the material presented should **not** be used for serious research:

- 1. There is no author or group identified as responsible for the material that appears. If there is someone taking responsibility for producing the material, there should be contact information (a postal address and phone number, and, less importantly, an email address) and verifiable credentials given. Legitimate sites, such as the Mayo Clinic's website, have credible articles that do not have authors but are produced by various boards, and those responsible for the article, though not named, may be contacted for further information on the subject matter. Ideally, the author or group should be associated with a research institution.
- 2. There may be authors, but they do not control how the material appears. An example of this kind of website would be Wikipedia, which is an open source, meaning a variety of people can contribute to the entries, whether they are experts on the subject or not. Although the site is moderated, there has been much controversy over its overall reliability. Students are advised not to use Wikipedia for scholarly work.

- 3. The source has not been recently updated (sites hang around for years). Ideally, the site should have been updated within the last few months.
- 4. The source is not linked to sources that you know are credible or the links don't work (in which case the source has not been kept up to date). Legitimate sites also often appear as links on other credible sites.
- 5. The source has no bibliographical information so that its research could be verified. A good site will offer its sources and opportunities to follow up on the information it gives.
- 6. The source targets consumers or clients for products and or services offered. You should not be encouraged to buy anything.
- 7. There are pop-ups (such as those inviting you to seek high school classmates). Some legitimate sites use pop-ups to direct you through their site, but pop-ups to watch out for are those that try to get you to buy something or answer a quiz (or believe you have won money).
- 8. The site asks you to fill out any forms or provide personal information. At best, you may have your inbox filled with spam; at worst, you could be a victim of identity theft.
- 9. The site does not allow you to skip animated sections (such as introductions). Some legitimate sites do use flash animation, but they allow the user to skip the sections.
- 10. The arguments made contain logical fallacies or are in any other way suspicious. Claims are not backed up with credible evidence.
- 11. There are significant errors in grammar and punctuation, as well as typos. Even a good site may have an error or two, but the writing should generally be clear and correct. A legitimate site will have had the benefit of editors and proofreaders to ensure the site is as error-free as possible.

5. What should I cite?

As above, everything that you use outside of common knowledge should be documented. For sources, you can choose from a number of primary sources (such as original works, testimony, figures, records, etc.) and secondary sources (such as analyses, reviews, critiques, etc.), depending on the purpose of your paper. You could cite anything from a billboard you saw on your way to work to a published study in a journal. Again, you should evaluate your source (see above) to ensure it is a credible one.

6. Where should my documentation appear?

In two of the most common documentation styles, MLA (Modern Language Association) and APA (American Psychological Association), sources are cited in the text of your paper, which means that a brief reference to each source appears in a parenthetical citation in or at the end of your sentence. You should ask your instructor or tutor which document style is preferred for papers in your course. In MLA format, footnotes and endnotes should only be used if you have additional material you want to include that will only have interest to some members of your audience. In APA format, endnotes are used for this purpose.

On a separate page at the end of your paper, you should provide a Works Cited (MLA) or References (APA) page in which you give fuller information about your sources in alphabetical order by the author's surname. If there is no author for the source, use the title (excluding any initial article—"a," "an," or "the") when alphabetizing the list of sources.

7. How should I cite the sources I have used?

a) How do I use parenthetical citations?

In MLA format, the author (or a shortened version of the title, if there is no author) appears first in a parenthetical citation, followed by a page number, if there is one, as in (Brown 35). If you are using more than one source by the same author, you will need to include both the author's name and the short title, as in (Brown, *Learning Styles* 35).

If the source you are using refers to another source for its information, you need to acknowledge the original source in an *indirect citation*. You should not pretend to have seen the original source and include it in your Works Cited or References. Instead, you refer to the original source, ideally earlier in your sentence, and indicate in your parenthetical reference that the author is citing another source.

Let's say that Brown refers to another source in *Learning Styles* on page 35. The original quotation is "Lesh and Moore's study argues that no matter what learning style students have, they will learn best in a small classroom," which Brown cites as from page 410 from Lesh and Moore's book, *Classroom Management*, published in 1999. In MLA format, you could cite the material this way: According to Lesh and Moore's study, "no matter what learning style students have, they will learn best in a small classroom" (qtd. in Brown 35). In APA format, you could cite the material this way: According to Lesh and Moore's study (1999), "no matter what learning style students have, they will learn best in a small classroom" (as cited in Brown, 2005, p. 35). You should not include any more information about the study unless it was particularly relevant to your paper.

b) How do I integrate quotations?

Starting a sentence with a quotation forces your readers to try to figure out why the quotation is there (what is it supporting?) and who is speaking. Instead, you should always introduce the quotation with your own words. This is called *integrating* your quotation. If you are quoting four lines or more (MLA) or forty words (APA), you need to set your quotation off by ten spaces in a *block quotation*. A block quotation is not enclosed in quotation marks, and any end punctuation comes before, not after, the parenthetical citation.

Each quotation should not only be introduced with your own words, but it should also be part of your own sentence, fitting in both logically and grammatically (i.e., if the quotation marks were removed, your sentence should still make sense). If you need to make any changes to the sentence, use ellipses (...) for one or more words taken out and square (editorial) brackets to indicate something has been added or changed.

There are three basic methods of integrating quotations. You will be using various versions of these methods in your paper. The two books referred to below are Behan Adzuki's textbook, *Educational Psychology Today* and Margaret Laurence's novel, *The Stone Angel*. Hagar is the protagonist in Laurence's novel.

- 1. Here, you introduce the author before the quotation. In this style, the sentence will always support the previous sentence in your paper.
 - **MLA** i) According to Adzuki, "The theory Robinson developed is based on common sense and observation, and it is easily applied" (321).
 - ii) Hagar thinks to herself, "I'll try to breathe more softly so my breath won't mask any outside noise" (Laurence 161).
- 2. In this style of integration, you begin with a statement that you will back up or expand on in the last part of your sentence. Remember that a colon must always be preceded by an independent clause (i.e., you should always be able to put a period where you have a colon).
 - MLA i) Not all theories of child development are complicated: "The theory Robinson developed is based on common sense and observation, and it is easily applied" (Adzuki 321).
 - ii) Hagar is afraid that she won't hear any approaching danger: "I'll try to breathe more softly so my breath won't mask any outside noise" (Laurence 161).

- 3. In the third, most sophisticated style of integrating quotations, you use part of a quotation within your sentence. Since the last part of the example in the first case is not from the source material, the parenthetical citation follows the quotation. In the quotation from Laurence's novel, the rest of the sentence is a paraphrase from the same source, so the citation comes at the end.
 - **MLA** i) Robinson's theory of child development, which "is based on common sense and observation" (Adzuki 321), has been used as part of Educational Psychology 200's curriculum for thirty years.
 - ii) Hagar remembers the rain of the past, "when the lightning would rend the sky like an angry claw at the cloak of God," as she lies in the cannery (Laurence 161).

c) How do I paraphrase correctly and effectively?

In a paraphrase, you restate the idea from your source material in your own words. This not only shows that you understand the material, but it also provides a smoother flow to your paper because it is interrupted less often by the words of others. When paraphrasing, make sure you do not just substitute some words (using a thesaurus, for example) or switch words around. A paraphrase should have your own words and your own syntax (word order). The examples which follow help to explain the differences between a correct, effective paraphrase and an unacceptable one.

In MLA format (and more recently in APA format, too), paraphrases are cited exactly as you would cite quotations (only without quotation marks).

For example, let's take this quotation: "The Navy is using extremely powerful sonar unnecessarily, and the result is that whales—confused and suffering from organ damage—are beaching themselves all along the coast" (Orcat 42).

The following is an **unacceptable** paraphrase:

Whales are beaching themselves because they are confused and suffering from internal injuries, both of which are a direct result of the Navy employing extremely powerful sonar (Orcat 42).

Even though the writer has cited the source, parts of the paraphrase are directly quoted, and, therefore, the paraphrase could be seen as plagiarized because it quotes the original without acknowledging that fact.

A **literal** paraphrase might look like this:

The Navy is employing exceptionally strong sound waves without needing to, and the consequence is that cetaceans, which are befuddled and tormented by internal injuries, are stranding themselves on the shorelines (Orcat 42).

Here the writer has followed the original syntax exactly and actually made the sentence more confusing by some of the substitutions. Many academic authorities see a literal paraphrase as a form of plagiarism.

The following is an example of an **acceptable** paraphrase:

The high incidents of beaching are a result of the mental and physical stress on whales caused by the Navy's intense levels of sonar use (Orcat 42).

Note how the passage was paraphrased so that it would fit into the writer's paper and not sound like someone else. This is a correct, effective paraphrase in that the writer is using his or her own sentence

structure but acknowledging that the claim comes from a source. Note, too, that the writer didn't need all the information from the original quotation.

Paraphrasing is not always easy, particularly when you are using sources that are outside of your area of expertise. It is fine to begin with a literal paraphrase as a draft sentence if that helps you to understand the original quotation. Then you need to put the idea into your own words, as if you were explaining an idea you had just been told to someone else. If you find that you cannot paraphrase someone else's words in some circumstance, maybe because the idea is stated so well or so plainly that any changes would make understanding the idea more difficult for your reader, then quote the words directly.

If you are paraphrasing several sentences that come from the same source and have not added any of your own analysis between them, you do not have to cite every sentence with a parenthetical citation. You do need to do this if your source material contains quotations, comes from different pages, and/or you are incorporating your own ideas into the paragraph. However, it is not enough to cite the source at the end of paraphrased material because your reader will not necessarily be able to tell where the paraphrased material begins. The alternate technique for citing a block of paraphrased material is called *sandwiching*. You begin the material by introducing the source and indicating the material to follow comes from this source; then you go on to explain these areas in however many sentences you need, ending with a parenthetical citation.

For example, you could say:

Some scientists have blamed the Navy's operations for the decrease in the whale population. Dr. Orcat's study indicates three main areas of inquiry. The first is the level of damage done to whales by sonar. The second area, which takes up most of the article, is the level of responsibility the Navy has for this damage. Finally, Orcat discusses whether the strength of sonar used is necessary to meet the Navy's security requirements (Orcat 42). Studies such as these provide compelling evidence that something can be done to protect the whales.

Note how "Dr. Orcat's study" indicates that the material to follow comes from your source, and the parenthetical citation at the end of the paraphrased passage indicates that everything between "Dr. Orcat's study" and the citation comes from the source. Sandwiching the material is less intrusive than having a citation after the second, third, fourth, and fifth sentences.

8. What if I forget how to cite a source correctly?

If you forget how to cite a source (or even where you should cite it), the good news is that you can look up the information in documents like this one or the many other resources available on or linked to Athabasca University's *Write Site* or in your textbooks. On the rare occasions when you may be tested on your knowledge of citation, you can prepare by studying. Because there is such a variety of sources that need to be documented and formats are continually be revised and updated, it's a good idea to look up the specifics each time until you are thoroughly familiar with the kind of citations you need to do for your particular course and your discipline. The main thing to remember is that you need to cite any information you find in your sources that is not common knowledge or risk being seen as plagiarizing.

Appendix A i) Examples of References in MLA format

Here are examples of some of the most commonly used kinds of sources. To document other kinds of sources, see *The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th ed. or go to the Purdue Online Writing Lab at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/

For all the parenthetical citations, the page numbers are chosen as examples only (i.e., you would use the page number where the quotation or paraphrase was found).

1. Book

For a book, you should begin with the **author** (surname, comma, first name), period, the **title** of the book (italicized or underlined), period, the book's **edition** (if noted), period, the **place of publication**, colon, the **publisher**, comma, the **year** the book was published, and finally the **publication medium**, period.

a) Book with one author

Brown, Charlize. Learning Styles. Toronto: Macmillan, 2005. Print.

In your essay, this would be cited as (Brown 34).

b) Book with two or three authors

Lesh, Klare, and Benjamin Moore. Classroom Management. London: Albion, 1999. Print.

In your essay, this would be cited as (Lesh and Moore 144).

c) Book with more than three authors

In MLA format, when there are more than three authors for a work, only the first author's name is given, followed by "et al." (which means "and others"). In the following example, the book was written by Nell Wynken, Jeremy Blynken, Toby Nod, and Romita Knight.

Wynken, Nell, et al. Insanity and Insomnia. New York: Time Square Books, 2000. Print.

You name Wynken because this author appeared first on the book. Do not choose the author order based on alphabetical order. Your parenthetical citation would be (Wynken et al. 123).

2. Work in an anthology or chapter in a book

a) Individual work in an anthology

In the following example, you are citing an individual poem from an anthology, edited by three people. The page number at the end is where the poem is found.

Blake, William. "The Lamb." The Harbrace Anthology of Poetry. 3rd ed. Ed. Jon C. Stott,

Raymond E. Jones, and Rick Bowers. Toronto: Nelson, 2002. 97. Print.

The citation would be (Blake 97) in the text of your essay.

b) Individual chapter in a book (where the chapters are written by different authors)

You follow the same format as for the poem above.

Adzuki, Behan. "A Review of Studies in Educational Psychology from 1990-2000." Educational

Psychology. Ed. Chayan Choudhury and Ishaan Chakrabarty. Boston: Houghton Mifflin,

2002. 55-63. Print.

The citation would be (Adzuki 57) in the text of your essay.

3. Journal article

Here the order is **author** (if there is an author), period, **title of article** in quotation marks with the period coming before the closing quotation marks, **title of journal** in italics, **volume number**, period, **issue number**, **date** in parentheses, colon, **page number**(s), period, and **publication medium**, period.

Albertson, Jeff. "The Greatest Comic Book Hero Ever." Popular Culture 51.3 (July 2000): 23-

40. Print.

The parenthetical citation would be (Albertson 33).

4. Newspaper article

The order of the newspaper article citation is similar to the journal article. The order is **author** (if there is an author), period, **title of article** in quotation marks with the period coming before the closing quotation marks, **title of newspaper** in italics, **date** (day, abbreviated month, year), colon, **page number**(s), period, and **publication medium**, period.

Imagine that there is no author for this article. Do not use "Anonymous" in place of the missing author; instead, begin with the title of the article.

"Stalker gets ten-year sentence." Calgary Herald 6 May 2006: A1. Print.

The parenthetical citation would be ("Stalker" A1). Note how a shortened version of the title has been used.

5. Personal interview

For an interview, give the **name** of person interviewed, period, add **personal interview**, and give the **date** of the interview (day, abbreviated month, year), period.

Groening, Matt. Personal Interview. 18 Nov. 1989.

This is cited in the text of your essay as (Groening). If you have already named the person earlier in your sentence, you do not need to have a parenthetical citation at the end.

6. Website

For a website, give the **author** (if there is an author), period, **title** of the page, period, **date on the page or site** (day, abbreviated month, year), period, **publication medium (web),** period, **date of your access to the site** (day, abbreviated month, year), period. If there is no date on the site, write "n.d."

Abernathy, Eleanor, and T. S. Eliot. *The Problem with Cats.* 15 Mar. 2004. Web. 10 Apr. 2006.

The parenthetical citation would be (Abernathy and Eliot). There would be no page numbers because the source is a website without page numbers. If the source was available in PDF form, page numbers would be available, as in the example below.

If the page is an article that belongs to a larger collection on a website, give the name of that collection (or the body responsible for the collection) after the date on the site, before the date of access.

"Anorexia: Early Signs and Diagnosis." 21 Oct. 2002. Anorexia Nervosa Treatment Center.

Web. 30 Jan. 2006.

The parenthetical citation would be ("Anorexia" 2).

7. Online Periodical

For an online periodical, give the **author** (if there is an author), period, **title of article** in quotation marks with the period or closing punctuation coming before the closing quotation marks, **name of the website** in italics, period, the **website publisher**, comma, the **date of publication**, period, the **publication medium**, period, and finally the **date of access**, period.

Note that the website publisher sometimes has a different name than the print publisher, often with domain names attached such as .org or .com. If there is no website publisher, add the abbreviation N.p.

Timson, Judith. "Forget about Tiger's Privacy: what about yours?" globeandmail.com. Globe

and Mail, 7 Dec. 2009. Web. 4 Jan. 2010.

The parenthetical citation would be (Timson).

8. Online Database Scholarly Journal Article

Here, the order is **author** (if there is an author), period, **title of article** in quotation marks with the period coming before the closing quotation marks, **title of journal** in italics, **volume number**, period, **issue number**, **date** in parentheses, colon, **page number**(s), period, **Database name** in italics, period, **publication medium**, period, **date of access**, period.

Small, Dan. "Amazing Grace: Vancouver's Supervised Injection Facility granted six-month lease on

life." Harm Reduction Journal 5.3 (2008): 1-6. Academic Search Complete. Web. 8 Sept. 2009.

The parenthetical citation would be (Small 3). Of course, if the quotation came from any of the other pages, you would substitute that page number in parentheses.

10. Encyclopedia or dictionary entry

For an encyclopedia or dictionary entry, you do not require an author (unless specified for your entry) or any publishing information other than the date.

"Capoeira." CD-ROM. 2006.

"Capoeira." Webster's Dictionary. 1999 ed. Print.

"Capoeira." Merriam-Webster OnLine. Web. 8 Sept. 2009.

The parenthetical citation would be ("Capoeira").

11. Film

For a film citation, include the **film's title**, period, **director**, period, **studio**, comma, **date** of release, period, **publication medium**, and period.

Fight Club. Dir. David Fincher. Twentieth Century Fox, 1999. Film.

For a film available on DVD or Videocassette, state the format and give the release date of the film in that format.

Fight Club. Dir. David Fincher. Twentieth Century Fox, 2002. DVD.

For a sample Works Cited, see the following page. The title Works Cited is centered, but it is not underlined, bolded, or italicized. Note that the page is double-spaced throughout and that there are no extra spaces between references. References are indented ½ inch. The list is in alphabetical order.

Appendix A ii) Sample Works Cited

Works Cited

- Abernathy, Eleanor, and Thomas Eliot. *The Problem with Cats.* 15 Mar. 2004. Web. 10 Apr. 2006.
- Adzuki, Behan. "A Review of Studies in Educational Psychology from 1990-2000." *Educational Psychology*. Ed. Chayan Choudhury and Ishaan Chakrabarty. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002. 55-63. Print.
- Albertson, Jeff. "The Greatest Comic Book Hero Ever." *Popular Culture* 51.3 (July 2000): 23-40. Print.
- "Anorexia: Early Signs and Diagnosis." 21 Oct. 2002. *Anorexia Nervosa Treatment Centre*. Web. 30 Jan. 2006.
- Blake, William. "The Lamb." *The Harbrace Anthology of Poetry*. 3rd ed. Ed. Jon C. Stott, Raymond E. Jones, and Rick Bowers. Toronto: Nelson, 2002. 97. Print.

Brown, Charlize. Learning Styles. Toronto: Macmillan, 2005. Print.

"Capoeira." Microsoft Encarta. CD-ROM. 2006.

Fight Club. Dir. David Fincher. Twentieth Century Fox, 1999. Film.

Groening, Matt. Personal Interview. 18 Nov. 1989.

Lesh, Klare, and Benjamin Moore. Classroom Management. London: Albion, 1999. Print.

- Small, Dan. "Amazing Grace: Vancouver's Supervised Injection Facility granted six-month lease on life." *Harm Reduction Journal* 5.3 (2008): 1-6. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 8 Sept. 2009.
- "Stalker gets ten-year sentence." Calgary Herald 6 May 2006: A1. Print.
- Timson, Judith. "Forget about Tiger's Privacy: what about yours?" *globeandmail.com*. Globe and Mail, 7 Dec. 2009. Web. 4 Jan. 2010.
- Wynken, Nell, et al. Insanity and Insomnia. New York: Time Square Books, 2000. Print.

