MLA In-Text Citation Style

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 This article provides the guidelines for creating MLA-style in-text citations for your paper, based on the seventh edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (2009). See that book for further details.

The goal of the entire in-text citation and Works Cited apparatus is to provide your reader with an easy, clear way to locate the sources you have drawn upon when writing your paper. When you cite a work, your reader might think, “I’d like to read that article or look at that book.” The in-text citation provides a key to the entries in the list of Works Cited at the end of the paper, making it easy for your reader to locate the work. It is therefore crucial that each key matches the appropriate reference work. The references are alphabetized to simplify matching the citation to the work. As a last measure of quality control, then, double check to be sure that each citation in your paper clearly matches a work in the Works Cited.

Guideline 1: Basic Citation.

MLA in-text citation style has the goal of providing just enough information for the reader to be able to go directly to the location in the cited work in the bibliography. For its reference list, the MLA uses the title Works Cited.

* The basic in-text citation consists of the source author’s last name and the page number of the information you borrowed.
* The page number has no *p.* or *pp*. in front of it.
* The page number is not set off from the author name by a comma when both appear in the parenthetical reference.
* The sentence-ending period follows the parenthetical citation.

Example 1

The question of whether the readers of a literary work discover meaning or create meaning from the text has once again been raised in another recent study (Doe 298).

Note that often you will want to create boundary markers to show where your use of the source begins and where it ends. You can easily do this by using the author’s full name for the beginning marker and the page number for the ending marker. Note the difference:

Example 2

Unclear where the source use begins:

It is sometimes said that we read to find ourselves there and that we read because we do not find ourselves there. Either way, readers turn to literature to find meaning. The question of whether the readers of a literary work discover meaning or create meaning from the text has once again been raised in another recent study (Doe 298).

Note that it is not clear whether all three sentences are derived from Doe, or whether only the last one is from the source. Adding a front-end boundary marker makes the borrowing clear:

It is sometimes said that we read to find ourselves there and that we read because we do not find ourselves there. Either way, readers turn to literature to find meaning. Jane Doe has recently brought up the question of whether the readers of a literary work *discover* meaning or *create* meaning from the text (298).

Guideline 2: Short quotations.

Short quotations are set off by quotation marks and cited by using the author’s name (last or first and last) and the page number.

* There is no comma between the author’s last name and the page number (Examples 3 and 5).
* If you mention the author in the text itself, you do not need to mention it in the parenthetical citation (Example 4).
* If a subsequent reference is clearly to the same author, only the new page number is needed in the citation (Example 5).

There is a high degree of flexibility in how you include the author’s name and the page number:

 Example 3

At the end of the novel, Wolf and Bear, the two Chihuahuas, reappear sitting in “a square of sunlight granted by a clerestory window far above their imaginations” (Howie 437).

 Example 4

At the end of the novel, Wolf and Bear, the two Chihuahuas, reappear sitting in what Howie describes as “a square of sunlight granted by a clerestory window far above their imaginations” (437).

 Example 5

At the end of the novel, sitting “in a square of sunlight granted by a clerestory window far above their imaginations” (Howie 437), Wolf and Bear, the two Chihuahuas, reappear. They sleep contentedly “until their master opens the garage door and their eyes” (439).

Guideline 3: Long quotations.

A quotation that would require more than four lines of your text should be in the form of a block quotation with the following features.

* Begin on a new line.
* Indent one inch from the left margin.
* Do not use quotation marks.
* Include the page number(s) in parentheses after the period at the end of the quotation.
* Unlike in-text quotations, where the citation is part of the sentence, the citation of a block quotation floats outside. Thus, the period ending the last sentence of the block follows the last word, and the parenthetical reference stands on its own.

 Because it is set off on its own and is clearly a quotation, no quotation marks are needed. Often the introductory lead-in is a sentence followed by a colon. (Remember that a colon is a handy punctuation mark meaning, “Here is an explanation of what I just said.”)

Example 6

In her study of our literary heritage, professor Jane Doe reminds us that in many cases, we came close to not having some works at all:

Many are the tales of the discovery of unique manuscripts of what turned out to be precious works of literary greatness. Poetry used as stuffing for steamer trunks or sofas; novels hidden in the walls of a garret in some forgotten, soon-to-be-demolished building; classics, all but scraped off the parchment, accidentally discovered underneath the lesser words in a palimpsest—we do not know how lucky we are. (233-234)

Notes:

1. In the research paper, the block quotation is double spaced, as is the rest of the text of the paper.

2. You should generally limit the length of block quotations to six to eight lines or so, in order to avoid losing your reader’s focus or interest. And remember, quoting at length soon looks like padding, because it usually is. If you have a spectacular long quotation, consider breaking it up and discussing it in parts.

Guideline 4: Multiple authors.

Remember that you can use the author’s full name in your introductory lead-in, or you can put the last name in the parenthetical reference. If you have multiple authors, you still have the choice.

* Cite both names each time.
* Connect the names with the word *and* both for in-text citation and for the Works Cited entry.

Note the possibilities:

Example 7

John Doe and Jane Smith remark that, while the battle would normally have been fought at sunup, “Clouds and fog in the early morning delayed the start of the carnage until nearly noon” (567).

According to the account given in *The Fog of War—And Other Weather Problems*, the battle that would normally have begun at dawn was delayed by “clouds and fog in the early morning,” preventing “the start of the carnage until nearly noon” (Doe and Smith 567).

 However, if there are more than three authors, listing all their names in the lead-in would be awkward, even if you used only their last names. So instead, use an abbreviated format:

Example 8

The research team offers a not-very-convincing argument that the social contract has progressed from “it’s all about you” (16th-17th century) to “it’s all about us” (18th-19th century) to “it’s all about me” (20th-21st century), alleging that pronounced narcissism is a modern—or postmodern—phenomenon (Doe et al. 443-448).

Notes:

1. In this last example, you might have chosen to say, “John Doe and the others on his research team,” but it would be ineffective to say, “John Doe, Jane Smith, Tom Brown, Ellen Jones, Fred Roe, and Alison Johnson offer” as your lead-in. Similarly, listing even all their last names in the parenthetical reference would clutter up your paper with unnecessary information.

2. The *et al.* is Latin for *and others*. It follows the author’s last name without a comma. The *et* (meaning *and*) is a complete word, so there is no period after it. The *al.* is an abbreviation (for *alii*) so there is a period after it. The phrase is written in regular roman type (not italicized), as shown in the example above.