

citing quoted material mla

Mastering the Art of Citing Quoted Material MLA: A Comprehensive Guide

citing quoted material mla is a fundamental skill for academic integrity and effective scholarly communication. Understanding how to properly attribute borrowed words and ideas prevents plagiarism, lends credibility to your arguments, and allows readers to locate your sources. This comprehensive guide will demystify the process of citing quoted material according to the Modern Language Association (MLA) style, covering everything from in-text citations to constructing your Works Cited page. We will delve into the nuances of integrating short and long quotations, handling omissions and additions, and addressing common challenges encountered when incorporating external sources into your academic writing.

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Understanding the Importance of MLA Citations

Properly citing quoted material in MLA format is not merely a stylistic requirement; it is a cornerstone of academic honesty. When you incorporate direct quotations from a source, you are acknowledging the original author's intellectual property. Failure to do so constitutes plagiarism, a serious academic offense with significant repercussions. MLA citation practices ensure transparency and accountability in research, allowing your audience to verify your claims and explore the original context of the ideas you present. Beyond academic integrity, effective MLA citations enhance the authority and persuasiveness of your own work. By grounding your arguments in the words of established experts or relevant primary sources, you strengthen your claims and demonstrate a thorough engagement with your subject matter. Readers can follow your intellectual journey, tracing the lineage of ideas and assessing the strength of your evidence. This builds trust and respect for your research and writing.

The Anatomy of an MLA In-Text Citation

At its core, an MLA in-text citation typically includes the author's last

name and the page number where the quoted material can be found. This brief parenthetical citation appears at the end of the sentence containing the quotation, before the final punctuation. For example, if you quote a sentence from page 45 of a book by Jane Doe, the citation would look like this: (Doe 45).

There are variations to this basic structure depending on the source and how you introduce the quotation. If the author's name is mentioned in the signal phrase introducing the quote, you may only need to include the page number in the parenthetical citation. For instance, "As Jane Doe notes, '...' " (45). This approach integrates the source information more seamlessly into your prose, preventing a cluster of citations at the end of every sentence. Understanding these nuances is crucial for creating clear and concise citations.

When to Use Parenthetical Citations

Parenthetical citations are essential whenever you directly quote or paraphrase material from a source. This includes factual information, statistics, specific phrases, and unique ideas that are not common knowledge. Even if you rephrase an author's idea in your own words (paraphrasing), you still need to provide an in-text citation to give credit. The goal is to guide your reader directly to the origin of the information you are presenting.

When to Omit the Page Number

In some instances, a page number is not applicable or necessary for an in-text citation. This is common when citing sources that do not have pagination, such as websites, interviews, or some electronic resources. In these cases, you will typically include only the author's last name (or a shortened version of the title if there is no author). For example, if you are citing an article by John Smith from a website, your in-text citation might simply be (Smith).

Integrating Short Quotations Effectively

Short quotations, generally defined as fewer than four lines of prose or three lines of poetry, should be integrated smoothly into your own sentences. They are enclosed in quotation marks and appear within the main body of your text. The key is to introduce the quote with a signal phrase that provides context and attributes the words to the original author. This signal phrase acts as a bridge, connecting your thoughts to the borrowed material.

A well-crafted signal phrase not only identifies the source but also hints at the relevance or purpose of the quotation. For example, instead of simply stating "... " (Author Page), you might write, "According to Smith, the implications of this finding are profound" (45) or "The author argues that

this trend signals a significant shift" (Jones 112). This approach makes your writing more engaging and guides the reader's interpretation of the quoted material.

Using Signal Phrases

Signal phrases are your tools for introducing quotations. They typically consist of a verb that indicates the author's action (e.g., argues, states, suggests, claims, asserts) followed by the author's name. Sometimes, you might also include a descriptive phrase to provide further context. For instance, "In his seminal work on the subject, Davis explains that..." (101). The variety of verbs you can use is vast, so choose one that accurately reflects the author's tone and intent.

Enclosing Short Quotes in Quotation Marks

All short, direct quotations must be enclosed in double quotation marks. The period or other terminal punctuation of the original sentence should generally follow the parenthetical citation, not the quotation marks, unless the quotation is a full sentence ending the sentence. For example: Smith argues that "the data clearly indicates a positive correlation" (78). If the quotation itself ends a sentence, the period goes after the parenthetical citation. However, if the quotation is part of your sentence, the punctuation follows the citation.

Handling Long Quotations (Block Quotes)

When a quotation exceeds four typed lines of prose or three lines of poetry, it should be set off from the rest of your text as a block quotation. This is done by indenting the entire quotation one half-inch from the left margin, double-spacing it, and omitting the quotation marks. The block quotation begins on a new line, and the parenthetical citation follows the final punctuation of the quotation.

The introduction of a block quotation is typically a complete sentence that ends with a colon. This colon signals that the following text is the direct quotation you are presenting. It is crucial to ensure that your own prose leads into the block quotation logically and that you follow up with your own analysis or commentary on the material presented. Block quotes should not stand alone; they must be integrated into your argument.

Formatting Block Quotes

To format a block quotation correctly in MLA style, begin by introducing it with a complete sentence followed by a colon. Then, indent the entire quotation one half-inch from the left margin. This indentation applies to

every line of the quoted material. Ensure that the quotation is double-spaced, just like the rest of your paper. Importantly, do not use quotation marks around a block quotation; the indentation itself signals that it is borrowed material.

Introducing Block Quotes

The introduction to a block quotation should set the stage for the material you are about to present. Often, this introductory sentence will explain the relevance or significance of the quote. For instance, "One of the most compelling arguments for this approach is articulated by Dr. Eleanor Vance: 'The long-term benefits of investment in renewable energy sources far outweigh the initial costs, fostering both economic growth and environmental sustainability' " (155). This sets up the quotation effectively and guides the reader's understanding.

Omissions and Additions in Quoted Material

Sometimes, you may need to omit certain words or phrases from a quotation or add explanatory material to clarify its meaning within your own text. MLA provides specific guidelines for indicating these changes to maintain accuracy and transparency.

Ellipses, indicated by three spaced periods (. . .), are used to show that words have been omitted from the original text. If the omission occurs at the end of a sentence, you may need to include a fourth period to indicate the end of that sentence. For example, if a quote originally read, "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog," and you omit "brown," you would write, "The quick . . . fox jumps over the lazy dog."

Using Ellipses

Ellipses are used to signify omissions within a quotation. If you are removing words from the middle of a sentence, use three spaced periods. For instance, "The study found that the participants . . . showed significant improvement." If the omission occurs at the end of a sentence in the original source, and you are continuing to quote from the same source but omitting the remainder of that sentence and possibly subsequent sentences, you would use the ellipsis followed by the period of your own sentence, or in some cases, four periods (the ellipsis followed by the sentence-ending period).

Using Brackets for Additions

Brackets ([]) are used to enclose any words or phrases you add to a quotation for clarification or to integrate it grammatically into your sentence. This might include changing a pronoun, adding an explanatory note,

or ensuring proper verb tense. For instance, if the original sentence was "She said it was too late," but you are incorporating it into a sentence referring to John, you might write, "John stated that [he] said it was too late." This clearly distinguishes your additions from the original author's words.

Citing Different Types of Sources in MLA

MLA citation practices extend to a wide array of source types, each with its own specific formatting requirements for both in-text citations and the Works Cited page. Understanding how to cite books, journal articles, websites, interviews, and other materials is crucial for comprehensive academic research.

Books typically require the author's last name and page number for in-text citations. For journal articles, you might cite the author and page number. Websites, however, often lack page numbers, necessitating citations that may include the author's name and, if available, a paragraph number or the title of the section. Familiarizing yourself with the MLA Handbook's guidelines for various media is essential for accurate citation.

Citing Books

When citing a book in MLA, the in-text citation usually consists of the author's last name and the page number (e.g., Smith 78). If you are quoting from a source with no author, you would use a shortened version of the title. For works with multiple authors, consult the MLA guidelines for proper attribution. The Works Cited entry for a book includes the author's name, title of the book (*italicized*), publisher, and publication year.

Citing Journal Articles

Citing journal articles in MLA involves the author's last name and the page number for in-text citations. The Works Cited entry for a journal article is more detailed, including the author(s), title of the article (in quotation marks), title of the journal (*italicized*), volume and issue numbers, year of publication, and page numbers. If accessed online, you will also include the DOI or URL.

Citing Online Sources

Citing online sources, such as websites and articles, requires attention to the specific information available. If an author is listed, use their last name in the in-text citation. If no author is provided, use a shortened version of the article title. Page numbers are often absent; in such cases, MLA suggests using paragraph numbers if they are available, or simply the

author's name or title. The Works Cited entry for online sources should include the author (if known), title of the page or article (in quotation marks), name of the website (italicized), publication date, and the URL or DOI. Always cite the most stable version of the source.

Crafting Your MLA Works Cited Page

The Works Cited page is an alphabetical list of all the sources you have cited within your paper. It appears at the end of your document and serves as a comprehensive bibliography for your readers. Each entry must provide enough detail for someone to locate the original source.

The format for each entry on the Works Cited page depends on the type of source. However, there are common elements that apply across most entries, such as the author's name, title of the work, and publication information. The MLA style emphasizes core elements that are presented in a consistent order, making it easier for readers to navigate your sources. Consistent formatting and alphabetical order are key to a well-organized Works Cited page.

Basic MLA Works Cited Entry Structure

The MLA style utilizes a system of core elements to construct citations. These elements generally appear in the following order: Author, Title of Source, Title of Container, Other Contributors, Version, Number, Publisher, Publication Date, and Location. Not all elements will apply to every source, but understanding this framework is crucial. For example, a book citation might be: Author. Title of Source. Publisher, Publication Date.

Alphabetizing Your Entries

All entries on your Works Cited page must be arranged in alphabetical order by the author's last name. If a source has no author, alphabetize it by the first significant word of the title (ignoring articles like "A," "An," and "The"). If you have multiple works by the same author, list them alphabetically by title, and use the author's name only in the first entry, substituting three hyphens followed by a period (---.) for subsequent entries.

Formatting Hanging Indents

A distinctive feature of the MLA Works Cited page is the use of hanging indents. This means that the first line of each entry is flush with the left margin, and all subsequent lines of that entry are indented one half-inch. This formatting makes it easier to scan the list and identify individual entries, particularly when alphabetizing.

Common Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them

Navigating the intricacies of citing quoted material can sometimes lead to common errors. Being aware of these potential pitfalls can help you avoid them and ensure the accuracy and professionalism of your academic work. One frequent mistake is incorrect punctuation around quotations, either with the citation or the quotation marks themselves.

Another area where students often struggle is with the integration of quotations. Simply dropping a quote into your text without proper introduction or analysis is a disservice to both the source and your own argument. Always ensure that your quotations serve a clear purpose within your writing and are effectively contextualized. Proofreading your citations meticulously is also paramount.

Incorrect Punctuation

Pay close attention to punctuation when incorporating quotations. Terminal punctuation (periods, question marks, exclamation points) typically follows the parenthetical citation, not the closing quotation mark, unless the quotation itself ends the sentence. Incorrect placement of periods, commas, and quotation marks can detract from the professionalism of your paper. Always double-check the MLA guidelines for specific punctuation rules.

Dropping Quotations

A common error is "dropping" quotations, which means inserting them into your text without a signal phrase or surrounding analysis. This makes the quote appear disconnected from your argument. Always introduce your quotes with a clear signal phrase that identifies the author and provides context. Following the quote with your own analysis is equally important; explain how the quote supports your point.

Inconsistent Formatting

Inconsistency in the formatting of in-text citations or Works Cited entries can be distracting and undermine your credibility. Ensure that you adhere strictly to MLA guidelines for all aspects of citation, from the placement of the author's name to the inclusion of publication details. Using citation management tools can help, but always verify their output against the official MLA Handbook.

Plagiarism Risks

The most significant pitfall is accidental plagiarism. This can occur due to insufficient citation, misattributing ideas, or quoting without proper

acknowledgment. To avoid this, be diligent about tracking your sources as you research and write. When in doubt, cite it. It is always better to over-cite than to under-cite and risk plagiarism.

FAQ

Q: What is the primary purpose of citing quoted material in MLA?

A: The primary purpose of citing quoted material in MLA is to give credit to the original author for their words and ideas, thereby avoiding plagiarism and upholding academic integrity. It also allows your readers to locate and consult the original sources for further information or verification.

Q: How do I cite a quotation when the author's name is mentioned in the text?

A: If the author's name is mentioned in your introductory signal phrase, you only need to include the page number in the parenthetical citation. For example: According to John Smith, "the findings were unexpected" (45).

Q: What should I do if a quotation has no page number, like from a website?

A: For sources without page numbers, such as many websites, you typically only include the author's last name in the in-text citation. If there is no author, use a shortened version of the title. MLA also suggests using paragraph numbers if they are clearly indicated on the page.

Q: How do I properly punctuate a block quotation in MLA style?

A: Block quotations are introduced with a colon, indented one-half inch from the left margin, double-spaced, and do not use quotation marks. The parenthetical citation follows the final punctuation of the quotation.

Q: When should I use ellipses (. . .) in MLA citations?

A: Ellipses are used to indicate that you have omitted words or phrases from an original quotation. They are placed within the quotation where the omission occurs, usually with spaces around the periods.

Q: What is the function of brackets ([]) in MLA quotations?

A: Brackets are used to enclose any words or phrases that you add to a quotation for clarification, to change the grammatical structure, or to update a pronoun. This clearly distinguishes your additions from the original author's text.

Q: How do I format the Works Cited page in MLA?

A: The Works Cited page is a list of all sources cited in your paper, alphabetized by author's last name or title. Each entry uses a hanging indent, where the first line is flush with the margin and subsequent lines are indented.

Q: What are the core elements of an MLA citation?

A: The core elements of an MLA citation are: Author, Title of Source, Title of Container, Other Contributors, Version, Number, Publisher, Publication Date, and Location. Not all elements are present in every source.

Q: How do I cite a source with more than two authors in MLA?

A: For sources with three or more authors, cite the first author's last name followed by "et al." in your in-text citation. On the Works Cited page, list all authors up to three; for four or more authors, list the first author followed by "et al."

Q: Can I use contractions or slang from the original source in my quote?

A: Yes, you should reproduce the quotation exactly as it appears in the original source, including any contractions, slang, or even grammatical errors, unless you are using brackets to indicate a change or clarification. Your own writing, however, should maintain a formal tone.

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