

Riley Smart

Prof. Royall Payne

English 666

September 2011

### 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 for Writers of Research Papers*. 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, go to the "Format" menu (in the toolbar above), choose "Paragraph," and select 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, 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.

Also in the "Format" menu, under "Font" this time, choose a normal font (like Times New Roman or Courier or Arial), "Regular" font style, and font size 10, 11, or 12. Then use the "Page Format" command in the "File" menu to set all margins—top and bottom, left and right—to one inch (1"). That does it for basic page set-up.

Page numbering is a little trickier. Go to the "View" menu and find "Header and Footer." When you click on it, a little header box will appear at the top of your document. Click the "Align Right" icon on the toolbar to make the cursor move to the far right of the header. Then type your last name plus one space, and click on the "Insert Page Number" icon in the floating "Header and Footer" toolbar that's still hovering over your page. Make sure the font of the header is the

same size and type as the font for the main text of the 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. Click “Close” when you’re done.

Note the four-line heading at the top left of the first page. Follow the example exactly. Note also the title, centered and double-spaced, with major words capitalized, but otherwise in normal typeface—no all-caps; no boldface; no italics.

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.

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 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 quotation, i.e. one that is less than four 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 there are no quotation marks. The next 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). Notice the page reference and its punctuation. If the sentence had not identified Joe Blow as its source (as in the following clause), “then the end-of-sentence source citation and punctuation would look like this instead” (Blow 47).

For longer borrowing of the words of other writers, take heed of what MLA scholar Anita Lotta Trivia has to say 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 two inches. Note that this is a half inch greater than a normal paragraph indentation, in order to distinguish a block quote from a new paragraph. Note, too, how punctuation at the end of a block quote differs from that of an embedded quotation. Had the author not been named in the “signal” sentence before this quote, the author's last name, too, would need to be included in the in-text citation—just as it was in the citation at the end of the embedded quotation. (872)

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.

Formatting and citation of poetry and drama work a little differently from prose. Lines of

poetry, like the one that follows, “Must be capitalized and punctuated exactly as they appear in the source poem, / With line breaks indicated by a slash / Just like those shown here for these four lines / Of poetry” (Opus, “Quotes,” 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 / And that's the gist of it” (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), while the latter one is from a long work (a book-length poem). 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 instructions if you are quoting from drama.

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 most glaring omission from this document is the lack of a Works Cited page at the end of the paper to give full information about the sources cited in the body of the text. This is absolutely crucial information in any paper that cites sources—which is to say, for just about any formal essay you might write for this course. Chapter 5 of the *MLA Handbook* describes the rules governing Works Cited listings for virtually every source type you might encounter. While the basic logic and types of information for all sources are similar, the particulars differ according to what kind of source you're citing (a book, an article, a website, etc). Find the MLA instructions and examples for each different source type you use, and then follow the instructions *and the examples* in the handbook *exactly* in all

details. Frequently used citation types include those described in the following sections of the handbook: 5.4.2 (article in a scholarly journal), 5.5.2 (book by a single author), 5.5.6 (a work in an anthology), 5.5.8 (an introduction, preface, etc.), 5.6.2 (website), 5.6.4 (periodical publication in an online database). Be sure to familiarize yourself with the descriptions and formats of these kinds of Works Cited entries, at the very least.

If you are an English major or minor, you *must* own a copy of the latest edition of the *MLA Handbook*, and you should get in the habit of consulting it routinely. The new edition of the *Handbook* includes, inside its back cover, a passcode for establishing access to the *MLA Handbook* website, which includes the full text of the book plus some valuable ancillary materials. Be sure to take a look, especially, at the “Research Projects” tab, where the Jane Austen sample student essay project includes a link to a PDF file of a sample student paper in literary interpretation. Use it as a template for proper MLA formatting and citation, and pay special attention to its Works Cited page.