

# MLA 101: A Quick Guide to In-text Citation

## What is MLA Style?

MLA style is one of several documentation systems (APA and Chicago are the two other most commonly used ones). MLA stands for Modern Language Association, the professional organization that created it. MLA style has traditionally been used in papers in Literature, Languages and the Arts; more recently, most of the Humanities use MLA style, while most of the Social Sciences use APA, the system created by the American Psychological Association. All documentation systems have the same purpose: to acknowledge words and ideas borrowed from others, particularly those published in print or online sources.

Similarly, though their specific styles vary, they all function in essentially the same way: they provide a map to lead your reader from what you write back to your sources (of information, of ideas and of exact words and phrases). It is important to do this correctly for two reasons: to give credit where credit is due and to not plagiarize. Doing it correctly also adds to your credibility because it marks you as academically trained, which in turn suggests a certain level of critical thought.

MLA style has two key parts: **parenthetical citations** which appear within the body of a paper and a **Works Cited** list at its end. The parenthetical citations are quick codes that lead readers to the corresponding citation on the Works Cited list, where they can find all the information they need should they want to look up and read your original sources – to verify your interpretation of the sources or use them in their own scholarly work. Documentation styles are complicated. The MLA handbook, for instance, is thicker than your *Little Penguin Handbook*,

This handout introduces in text citations, as well as how to format titles and quotes within your paper. Here's a link to [another handout about the Works Cited list](#).

## In-Text Citations (aka Parenthetical Citations)

Whenever you refer to the works of others in your paper – whether paraphrasing, quoting or summarizing – you need to include a parenthetical citation: a set of parentheses containing the author's last name and the relevant page number(s).

Human beings have been described as "symbol-using animals" (Burke 3).

Note that the parentheses comes before the final period. If you've just named your author or source, you don't need to include the name in the parenthetical, just the page number. For example:

Kenneth Burke describes human beings as "symbol-using animals" (3).

## Formatting Quotations

### Short Quotations

Quotations less than 4 typed lines should be enclosed within quotation marks, followed by your parenthetical citation. The parenthetical goes *before* the period. For example:

According to some, dreams express "profound aspects of personality" (Foulkes 184). Others disagree.

The parentheses usually comes before the final period, after the quotation marks. That changes with "block quotes" (longer quotations).

### Long Quotations (Block Quotes)

Quotations more than 5 typed lines should be offset in a free-standing block of text indented from the left (or both) margin(s). *Do not enclose block quotes in quotation marks*; the indenting substitutes for them. Here's what a long quotation might look like in a paper about Charlotte Bronte's novel *Wuthering Heights*:

Nelly Dean treats Heathcliff poorly and dehumanizes him throughout her narration. In this section, which she narrates, she refers to him repeatedly as "it":

They entirely refused to have it in bed with them, or even in their room, and I had no more sense, so, I put it on the landing

of the stairs, hoping it would be gone on the morrow. By chance, or else attracted by hearing his voice, it crept to Mr. Earnshaw's door, and there he found it on quitting his chamber. Inquiries were made as to how it got there; I was obliged to confess, and in recompense for my cowardice and inhumanity was sent out of the house. (Bronte 78)

Though it was not unusual to refer to a child as "it" in the 19th century, Bronte's other characters do not do so. This suggests...

Note that here, with long, indented quotes, the parenthetical citation goes *after* the end punctuation (period).

### Quotes Within Quotes:

Sometimes you want to quote a source that quotes someone else. For example, Elinore Saint Vincent Millay wrote "How much do I love thee? Let me count the ways." If you wanted to quote a critic who was writing about her poem, and quoting it, you'd need 2 sets of quotation marks: one for critic and one for Millay. Here's what it would look like in a short quotation:

One critic claims that "Edna Saint Vincent Millay's 'How much do I love thee? Let me count the ways' is perhaps the most oft quoted love poem in the English language" (Pettigrew 15). But how many of us can remember even one of the ways she listed?

It's best to think of the critical article as a box holding the line from the poem. The *external* quote from the literary critic (the box) gets regular quotation marks ("quote") while the interior quote from the poem gets single one ('quote').

**However, with a block quote** (see above), since there are no quotation marks around the main quote, you'd use regular quotation marks for the quote-within-a-quote.

### *Formatting Titles*

Always capitalize all words in a title, except a, the, of, for and other small linking words. Use underlining, italics or quotation marks correctly:

*This is the Title of a Book*                      "This is the Title of an Article"  
This is Also the Title of a Book        "This is the Title of a Poem or Story"

Italics and Underlining mean the same thing. They are used for longer works/full volumes including book titles, periodical titles, newspaper titles, titles of plays and films, titles of a television series. "Quotation marks" are used for shorter works/things that appear within volumes including poem titles, short story titles, episodes of TV shows, chapter titles, titles of articles that appear within newspapers, periodicals, etc.