



# MLA Overview for Literature Classes

Kelli McBride

# 2 Important Concepts

1. People deserve and require credit for their work.
2. Successfully completing literature classes requires students learn to write, think critically, and research on their own, not via someone else's work.

# 2 Parts to MLA Documentation

- Works Cited page
- Parenthetical Notation

# Works Cited

- Alphabetical listing of all works used *in the essay*. Usage can be in the form of:
  - Quotes
  - Summaries
  - Paraphrases
- Is always a stand alone page(s) at the end of an essay.
- Maintains margins, page numbering, and spacing from the rest of the essay.
- Uses hanging indention rather than paragraph indention for each entry.

# Purpose

- We include a works cited page in order to:
  - Give credit to the authors whose works we have used to support our own ideas.
  - Help readers track down the sources to learn more about the topics we have discussed.
  - Add credibility to our ideas by showing readers the types of sources we are using (*ethos*)

# Content

- Any source can be documented
- Books, periodicals, multimedia, and Internet sources have different needs when formatting. However, all have some basic fundamentals in common.
  - Who created this source?
  - Who published this source?
  - When was it published?

# Plagiarism

- Not including a source you have used in your paper on the works cited page is **plagiarism**, intentional or technical.
- Not including a complete entry for a source can be plagiarism if the information is inaccurate, but most of the time it is just a serious deduction, perhaps resulting in a D for an assignment.
- Messing up style, such as punctuation, title case, or order of information will lead to points deducted, but these are not plagiarism issues.

# Parenthetical Notation

- When writers incorporate information from any outside source in their essays, they must give credit to that source at that point via parenthetical notation, sometimes called in-text citation.
- These notices can take a variety of forms, and writers should be familiar with all of them in order to add variety to their writing.



# Content

- Parenthetical notation takes its content from the source in question and from the arrangement of information on the Works Cited page.
- Whatever information the writer uses as the first item in a works cited entry should be the identification information in an in-text citation.
- The page number information should come from the actual document itself – what pages in the source display this specific info?

# Formatting: Signal Out

- The most common and basic type of citation is adding the author's name and page number where the information cited occurs: **(Smith 32)**.

This is sometimes called the “Signal out” – meaning that it signals to your reader that you have finished the reference to the outside source.

# Format: Signal In

- It is usually better, though, to also include a “Signal In.” This gives the reader information in the sentence about the source you are using, and clearly tells them that you are sharing information from an outside source.
- The most common type of the “Signal In” is the cited author name drop: **According to Harvard Law professor Lawrence Lessig, people should be allowed to legally sample copyright information and remix it to create something new (45).** This lets my reader know I’m talking about Lessig, so I only need to include a page number in the “Signal out” if Lessig is the author of the source from which I am citing.

- **Secondary Source Signal In:** If I am quoting someone from a source written by someone else, I have to juggle both the quoted author and the author from whose source I got the information.

For example, Lessig wrote a book called Remix. If I use that as my source, then I have to only use his name. However, if I read an article by Tom Smith about Lessig, and it is from this article that I take my information, then I have a secondary source issue. That signal out and signal in would look like this: **According to Harvard Law professor Lawrence Lessig, people should be allowed to legally sample copyright information and remix it to create something new (qtd. in Smith 5).**

# Secondary Source, cont.

- Importance of this difference: If Tom Smith has inaccurately credited Lessig or inaccurately presented Lessig's ideas, then it is important for my protection legally, in case of libel, that I myself do not continue to directly credit Lessig. Showing that I only got this info via another source, protects me.
- **Lesson:** It is always best to find the primary source rather than use a secondary source. However, sometimes that is not possible.

- How you incorporate information does not matter. **All sources** require **at the very least** a **signal out**.
- Internet sources have some issues that cause problems. Because most internet sites do not have page numbers, signaling out is not necessary if you signal in. Once you have credited an Internet source by signaling in, there is nothing left to put in parenthesis.



# Special Literary Conventions

Using literary texts requires some special formatting depending on the source.

- The first reference to the work must include a signal-in that lists the author and title: In Edgar Allan Poe's poem, "The Raven".....
- Unless dealing with more than one work in an essay answer, you only need refer to the author in the signal-out once. After that, the reader knows you are talking about the same work.
- Quotations should not exceed more than 20% of the total page length.

# Verb Tenses in Literary Writing

- Always write about literature in the present tense (MLA calls this the historical present):
  - Hamlet feels betrayed by everyone around him.
- However, when discussing events in the play chronologically, you must follow regular verb tenses:
  - Hamlet first saw his father's ghost and then decided to seek revenge.



# Title Formatting

- We italicize the names of books, full-length plays, and book-length poems, such as epics.
  - *The Great Gatsby*
  - *Othello*
  - *Iliad*
- We use quotation marks around the titles of poems, short stories, and one-act plays.
  - “The Raven”
  - “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”
  - “The Good Doctor”

# The Literary Signal-Out

- Poetry: rather than page numbers in the signal-out, we use line numbers. For the first reference, spell out the word “line” or “lines”: (Poe line 21) or (Frost lines 2-4).
- After the first use, abbreviate line to “l.” and lines to “ll.”: (Poe l. 5) or (Frost ll. 7-10).
- Plays: rather than page numbers, we use act, scene, and line number(s): (5.2.118-20), where 5 = Act, 2 = Scene, and 118-20 = line numbers.

# Plagiarism

- **Not giving credit to your sources in your essays is plagiarism.**
- **Crediting sources only on either the works cited page OR via in-text citation is incomplete documentation, what we call “technical plagiarism.”**
- **Whether intentional or technical, the resulting grade is still an F.**