

## The MLA System (page 1 of 4)

By Dr. Karen Petit

Writers of papers in Humanities courses use the MLA system, from the Modern Language Association, to document (describe) their source(s) of information. By correctly using the MLA system, a writer can give credit to the person, organization, or website that first created an idea, word(s), visual, or sound. When using the MLA system, a writer must clearly indicate the author of each borrowed word, sentence, or idea. If readers of a paper will not know which words or ideas were written by which author, then the writer should revise the paper for correct, clear use of the MLA system, as well as for any other problems, such as grammatical errors.

### Parts of the MLA System

The MLA documentation system requires the use of in-text citations that are placed in the body of a paper; each of these citations must connect to the first word of a Works Cited entry at the end of the paper. **The three elements that often are included in the body of a paper are described here, followed by examples of parenthetical citations, a listing of helpful websites, information about Works Cited pages, and an example of a Works Cited page** with entries that connect to the in-text citations on pages 1-3 of this handout.

1. A **lead-in phrase** lets the reader of a paper know that the upcoming ideas or words were first expressed by someone other than the writer of the paper. A lead-in phrase can be used to show agreement, disagreement, or some other logical method of moving smoothly between two different authors' ideas.
2. A **quotation, a paraphrase, or a summary** states the ideas or words that have been borrowed.
3. An **in-text parenthetical citation** "cites" the original author's last name and the page number(s) where the borrowed ideas or words first were stated. When no page number is available, a paragraph number can be included in the parentheses if the original source has numbered its paragraphs or sections.

### Examples of In-text Parenthetical Citations

#### A Quotation with An Author's Name and a Page Number in Parentheses

In the following example, quotation marks enclose the words that were borrowed from a poem by Frost. The slash indicates where a line break occurs in the original poem. At the end of the quotation is a parenthetical citation: the author's last name and a page number are "cited" in the parentheses.

"I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference" (Frost 836).

#### A Paraphrase or a Summary with an Unknown Author and No Page or Paragraph Numbers

A paraphrase has no quotation marks because only the information or ideas—not the words—are borrowed. When an author's ideas are rephrased (a paraphrase) or rephrased and condensed (a summary), a citation and a Works Cited entry are required. The following paraphrase illustrates what happens when an author's name is unknown: an organization's name or a short version of the title (in quotations or italics) is used. No page or paragraph numbers are stated on the original webpage, so none are listed in this example of a citation:

93.1% of 2,834 CCRI freshmen who responded to a 2006 survey were Rhode Island residents ("Community").

#### A Quotation from a One-Page Source with the Author's Name in the Lead-in Phrase

When an author's name appears in a lead-in phrase, it is not included in the parentheses. Also, no page number is stated in the following example because, when the source is only one-page long, the page number only needs to appear on the Works Cited page. Hence, there are no parentheses in this example of a citation:

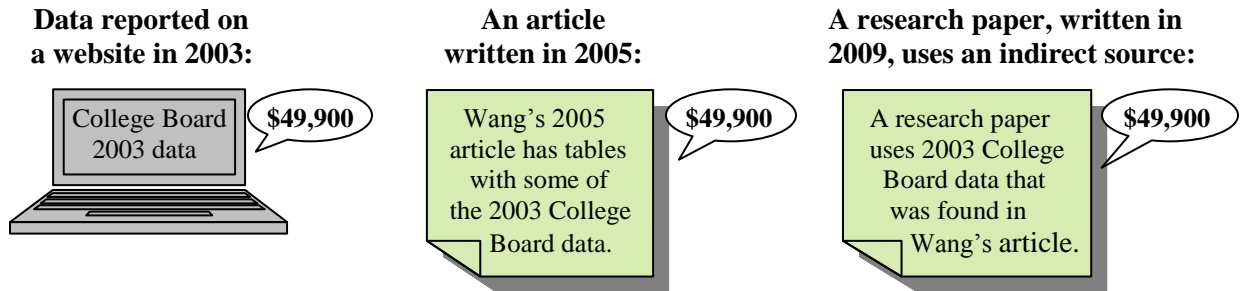
In "Four Myths About College Costs," Wang says, "Over a working lifetime, the typical college graduate earns about 75% more than a high school grad does."

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**An Indirect Quote from a Database**

Occasionally, the writer of a paper might use an “indirect source,” which quotes, summarizes, or paraphrases information from someone else’s quote, summary, or paraphrase:



When an indirect source is used, the Works Cited page only includes data from the direct source, as page four of this handout illustrates. The in-text citation, on the other hand, includes information about both sources; it begins with the name of the author of the indirect source and is followed by these items: a comma, the phrase “qtd. in,” the name of the author of the direct source, and the page number (unless unknown or not needed):

The “median annual earnings by level of education” is \$49,900 for college graduates with a Bachelor’s degree and \$30,800 for high school graduates (College Board, qtd. in Wang).

**A Unified, Coherent Paragraph with Three Multiple-Author Sources and an Organization as a Source**

Every paragraph that contains quotations, paraphrases, and/or summaries should be coherently written with a clear organizational structure, logical transitions, clear wording, correct grammar, and correct sentence structures. The following example of a paragraph illustrates how ideas from four sources can be logically connected to the paragraph writer’s own ideas with a topic sentence, organization of supporting details, and the use of transitions. The paragraph’s first source has four authors. When a source has four or more authors, the first author’s name can be used with the phrase “et al.,” which means “and others.” The other three citations in the following paragraph refer to articles that have two authors, three authors, and an organization as the author.

Writing is an important skill necessary for success both in college and at work. In college courses, writing can help participants to learn a course’s content, as well as to communicate effectively and to prepare for a career position. In health profession courses, for example, “a core skill required of health professionals [ . . . ] is the ability to write about scientific content concisely and accurately for their colleagues” (Rawson et al. 234). Effective writing is also needed in other courses; one article explains the importance of writing skills in different kinds of community college courses: “Writing essays and papers that meet academic standards translates into receiving passing or acceptable grades in all types of community-college courses” (Hennessy and Evens 263). Not only is writing important in college courses, but it is also important at work. Writing has been “deemed essential for success in the workplace” (Baker, Gersten, and Graham 109). More than an effective resume is needed because, once an appropriate career position has been located, a job applicant will have to not only attain but also hold onto the position. The National Commission on Writing surveyed 120 large American companies “employing nearly 8 million people”; the survey data shows: “Writing is a ‘threshold skill’ for both employment and promotion, particularly for salaried employees” (3). Thus, to prepare for, to acquire, and to be promoted in a career position all require effective writing skills.

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### An Online Reference Source with a Paragraph or a Section Number

When no page number is available, a paragraph or a section number can be included in the parentheses if the original source has numbered its paragraphs or sections:

“Plagiarism” is defined by *Dictionary.com* as “the unauthorized use or close imitation of the language and thoughts of another author and the representation of them as one's own original work” (par. 1).

### Changes within Quotations: Deletions, Additions, and Letters

When a writer changes an original source's words, an ellipsis (. . .) should be used to indicate deleted words; square brackets indicate additions or show a change in a letter's capitalization. Square brackets often are used with an ellipsis to clarify that the writer of a paper, rather than an original author, added the ellipsis:

“[T]he unauthorized use [. . .] of the language and thoughts of another author and the representation of them [words or ideas] as one's own original work” is “plagiarism” (*Dictionary.com* par. 1).

When an ellipsis appears in an original text, explanation can be added to clarify who authored the ellipsis, as is illustrated by the National Commission on Writing's report that is cited on this handout's Works Cited page.

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### Helpful Websites

The website for the Community College of Rhode Island's Writing Center has many helpful resources for research, writing, and other tasks: <http://www.ccri.edu/writingcenter/resources/index.shtml>.

Diana Hacker's *Research and Documentation Online* has information and sample papers for the MLA, APA, Chicago, and CSE systems; included on this site are many examples of citations and Works Cited entries: <http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/hacker/resdoc/humanities/english.htm>.

Calvin College's *KnightCite* can help to format a bibliography page: <http://www.calvin.edu/library/knightcite>.

*Landmarks Son of Citation Machine* can help with bibliographic format: <http://citationmachine.net>.

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### Works Cited Pages

A **Works Cited page** alphabetically lists information about all of the sources—the “works” that have been “cited” in the body of the paper. Each Works Cited entry should include as much of this data as possible: the author's name, a partial work's title in quotation marks (articles, stories, poems, essays, songs, or webpages), a whole work's title in an italic font (books, websites, databases, films, paintings, or performances), print publication information (with the abbreviation “n.p.” if no place of publication is stated), electronic publication information (with “n.d.” if there is no publication date and “n. pag.” if there are no pages given or if new pagination is used for a web version of a text), the medium (print, web, film, performance, oil on canvas, CD-ROM, or E-mail), a date of access, and sometimes a web address. According to the seventh edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, a web address should be included only when it will help readers to find the source and/or when it is required by a professor: “You should include a URL as supplementary information only when the reader probably cannot locate the source without it or when your instructor requires it” (Modern Language Association 182). Students should ask each of their professors if web addresses are required on the Works Cited pages of their papers. **If a writer is uncertain about whether or not a reader or a professor needs a web address, the web address should be included.**

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