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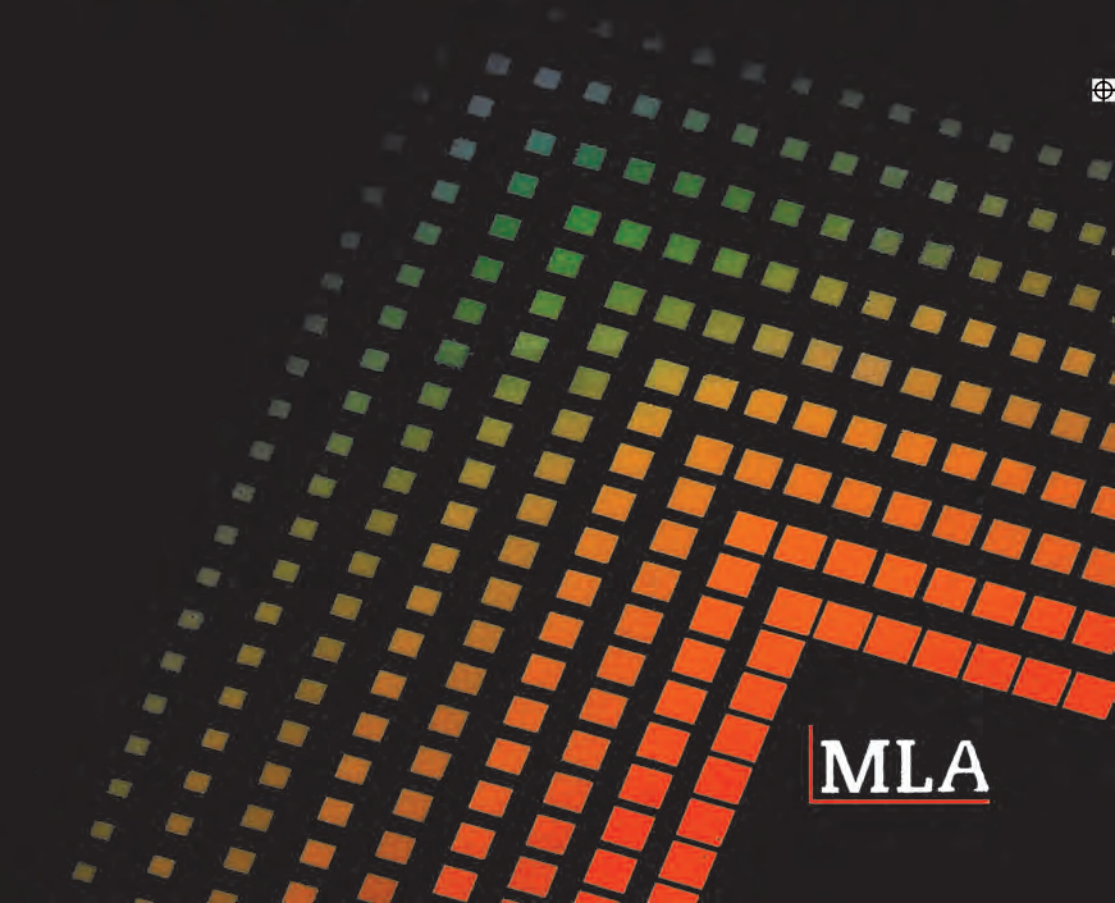
MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers

SEVENTH EDITION



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Foreword

"Why do I need to learn MLA style?" It is a question we sometimes hear at the Modern Language Association, and the answer is simple. Every time you write a research paper, you enter into a community of writers and scholars. The disciplines in this community all use conventions—think of the ways chemists, mathematicians, and philosophers use symbols and special terms to transmit information. MLA style represents a consensus among teachers, scholars, and librarians in the fields of language and literature on the conventions for documenting research, and those conventions will help you organize your research paper coherently. By using MLA style, you will direct your readers to the sources you consulted in arriving at your findings, and you will enable them to build on your work.

MLA style is especially useful in today's research environment, and humanities scholars and classroom teachers generally prefer it over other documentation systems. One advantage of MLA style is its simplicity. When you write a paper in MLA style, you place in parentheses brief references to the sources you are using to make your argument, and at the end of your paper you place an alphabetical list of the works you cite. By requiring in citations only the information readers need to locate a source in your list of works cited, MLA style makes reading a research paper easier on the eyes—and the brain—than other styles do. Further, MLA style is known for its flexibility: you have options when it comes to including elements in your list of works cited. When you need to improvise, the modular format outlined in this book gives you the knowledge and confidence to make consistent choices so that you can produce an authoritative and persuasive research paper.

The *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* will not only teach you MLA style, it will also help you at all stages of your project. It will guide you through virtually any question you may have about writing a research paper, from formulating a topic to using abbreviations in the list of the works that you cite in the paper. If you are like most users of the *MLA Handbook*, you will return to it many times as you work on your research papers. In the course of your research, you may encounter unfamiliar sources that you want to cite, or you may

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have doubts about proper punctuation or abbreviations. Perhaps you will want to learn how to cite texts in a language other than English, to document material you found on a Web site, or to quote from an e-mail message you received. The *MLA Handbook* is an easy-to-use reference tool for solving these problems.

Going beyond documenting sources, the *MLA Handbook* helps you understand how to work with them in your writing. A chapter on plagiarism covers summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting from sources. The chapter explains the different forms of plagiarism, how to avoid them in your work, and what to do if you discover you have unknowingly plagiarized. The *MLA Handbook* also teaches you how to evaluate the authority of the sources you consult, guiding you especially through the sometimes difficult process of determining the reliability of material on the Web.

How long has MLA style been in circulation among students and scholars? In 1951 the Modern Language Association published "The MLA Style Sheet," compiled by Executive Director William Riley Parker, and ever since then the association has been refining the elements of MLA style and adding information that helps researchers perform their work. Founded in 1883 and based in New York City, the MLA is an organization of over thirty thousand scholars and teachers in English and other modern languages. The MLA publishes a range of journals and books designed to promote teaching and scholarship in languages and literatures. While most of our publications are intended for teachers and advanced researchers, the *MLA Handbook* was created with the student in mind. Sometimes students ask us how we devise the style that we recommend in the *MLA Handbook*. The process is collaborative: our editorial and publications staff members, in consultation with expert MLA members, discuss the relevance of MLA style and attempt to seek a balance between concision and informativeness. Librarians, students, classroom teachers, editors, scholarly authors, and many others contribute to the formulation of MLA style.

The seventh edition of the *MLA Handbook* is accompanied for the first time by a Web-based component that helps users learn MLA style and understand better the activities of researching and writing a paper. Students, instructors, and librarians have shown great interest in gaining access to the *MLA Handbook* on the Web, and we responded by developing a site that contains the full text of the book with complementary materials. The site includes sample papers with step-by-step narratives showing how the papers were prepared, and

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each narrative can be explored from a number of perspectives. For example, if you are having trouble defining a topic, you can look at the ways the authors of the sample papers did it. If you are unsure how to evaluate sources for inclusion in your project, you can follow the steps outlined in the narratives. We hope that the new electronic component will help students in every stage of their work. Scholarly research is increasingly conducted in a digital environment, and we are pleased to usher the *MLA Handbook* into that world.

Much has changed since I used the 1977 edition of the *MLA Handbook* to write my two undergraduate theses. Its instructions for preparing the paper noted that a "fresh black ribbon and clean type are essential" and advised against using "thin paper except for a carbon copy" (44). I imagine most readers of the current edition have never handled a black ribbon and have little concept of how carbon copies work. In just thirty years, there has been a dramatic shift in the way we conduct research, find primary and secondary materials, process information, and prepare a paper for submission. I was grateful that I had the *MLA Handbook* when I was a student, and I cannot imagine tackling a research project in today's world without the careful, concise, and authoritative edition you hold in your hands.

Many people contributed to the seventh edition of the *MLA Handbook*. A full list of acknowledgments appears in the preface, but I wish to single out four MLA staff members for special thanks. David G. Nicholls, director of book publications, revised the *MLA Handbook* and oversaw the development of the Web content for the project. Judy Goulding, director of publishing operations, guided the editing and production of this edition with the capable assistance of Eric Wirth, associate editor of MLA publications, and Judith Altreuter, director of print and electronic production. Finally, I want to pay tribute to my predecessor, Phyllis Franklin, who always made sure the *MLA Handbook* was at the center of the association's work and who used to ask me regularly how the new edition was coming along.

Rosemary G. Feal
Executive Director
Modern Language Association

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Preface

For over thirty years, millions of college and high school students have turned to the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* for guidance. The *MLA Handbook* explains how to identify a topic and develop it through research. It also shows you how to work with sources in your writing, gives advice on the mechanics of academic prose, and authoritatively presents MLA documentation style. Reorganized and revised, the new, seventh edition evaluates the kinds of research resources available today and demonstrates techniques for finding reliable information online. The seventh edition is the first to include a Web component; by logging in, you can access the full text of the print volume along with additional examples, research project narratives with sample papers, and answers to frequently asked questions (see "Note on the Web Component").

This edition introduces student writers to a significant revision of MLA documentation style. In the past, listing the medium of publication in the works-cited list was required only for works in media other than print (e.g., publications on CD-ROM, articles in online databases); print was considered the default medium and was therefore not listed. The MLA no longer recognizes a default medium and instead calls for listing the medium of publication in every entry in the list of works cited. This change helped us standardize and simplify our recommendations throughout chapter 5. Following the advice of instructors, librarians, and scholars, we further simplified the guidelines for citing works on the Web. For example, the MLA no longer recommends including URLs in the works-cited-list entries for Web publications. Because issue as well as volume numbers of journals are useful for finding articles in electronic databases, the MLA now requires inclusion of both for every journal article in the list of works cited. The *MLA Handbook* also presents new guidelines for citing forms that are gaining more scholarly attention, such as graphic narratives and digital files. Graduate students, scholars, and professional writers will already be familiar with the MLA's revised documentation style, for it was presented to them in the third edition of the *MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing*, released in 2008. Since then, we have refined the guidelines for citing works in newspapers

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and articles in reference works; the refinements appear for the first time in this edition of the *MLA Handbook* (in 5.4.5 and 5.5.7, respectively). Similarly, we have clarified our guidance on the punctuation of titles of works (presented in 3.6.1 of the *MLA Handbook*).

Additional updates and revisions appear throughout this edition of the *MLA Handbook*. Chapter 2, for example, gives an expanded discussion of when documentation is not needed, and it also offers guidance on what to do if your research involves human subjects. Several changes affect the guidelines for preparing a printed paper. The volume now assumes the use of italics, not underlining, for text that would be italicized in a publication (see 3.3). Chapter 4, which discusses the format of the research paper, is completely reorganized and revised under the assumption that all students write papers using word-processing software. It presents new instructions for preparing figures, tables, and captions. The appendixes now lead readers to writing guides and specialized style manuals.

Each edition of the *MLA Handbook* is developed by many collaborators, as previous lists of acknowledgments make clear. The first three editions were written by Joseph Gibaldi and Walter S. Achtert, and the fourth, fifth, and sixth editions were prepared by Gibaldi. In taking on the task of preparing the seventh edition, I knew that I would be carrying over much material from the previous one; I also knew that I would work with colleagues in writing the new material for the Web component. I decided that the new edition should be considered the product of corporate authorship. I was responsible for writing or revising the entire print volume and for preparing the additional examples that appear in the Web version of it, and I was supported in my work by members of the book-publications department. James C. Hatch, Sonia Kane, Margit A. Longbrake, and Joshua Shanholtzer helped develop the research project narratives and the sample papers. Lucy D. Anderson and Will Kenton provided research assistance. I consulted the MLA's Publications Committee at several stages in the development of the research project narratives and sample papers, so thanks are due to Dudley Andrew, Bradin Cormack, Rena Fraden, Sara Friedrichsmeyer, Irene Kacandes, Amy Katz Kaminsky, E. Ann Kaplan, Steven Mailloux, Saree Makdisi, Cristanne Miller, Karen Newman, Gerald Joseph Prince, C. P. Haun Saussy, Elaine Savory, Shu-mei Shih, Diana Sorensen, Richard Terdiman, and Susan Wells. Each research project narrative and its accompanying sample paper were reviewed by a consultant reader; Joseph Litvak and Susan Wells

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performed the reviews, and their expert advice helped us make improvements.

The preparation of this new edition involved many members of the MLA staff. The editorial department, under the direction of Judy Goulding, played an important role in planning and producing the publication. Eric Wirth served as principal copyeditor. Judith H. Altreuter coordinated print and electronic production. Others in the department who assisted in editing and producing this edition include Paul J. Banks, Anna S. A. Chang, Lisa George, Angela L. Gibson, Kathleen M. Hansen, David W. Hodges, Elizabeth Holland, Vivian S. Kirklin, Kerry Marino, Sara Pastel, Pamela Roller, Laurie Russell, and Christopher Zarate. Terrence Callaghan, director of operations, and Leonard J. Moreton, manager of Member and Customer Services, assisted in developing the technical and commercial infrastructure supporting the Web component. Barbara A. Chen, director of Bibliographic Information Services and editor, *MLA International Bibliography*, offered comments and suggestions, as did Nelly Furman, director of programs and ADFL. In planning the new edition, the MLA benefited from the advice of focus groups representing graduate students, librarians, high school teachers, and college teachers. A letter from Vernon Nargang led us to update our advice on citing works in newspapers. Soelve I. Curdts assisted in the evaluation of features in the Web component that describe figures for users with visual impairment. Finally, the new Web component featured in this edition would not exist without the leadership of Rosemary G. Feal, executive director, and the MLA's Executive Council. I thank everyone who contributed to the development of the seventh edition.

David G. Nicholls
Director of Book Publications
Modern Language Association

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Note on the Web Component

Every copy of this edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* comes with an activation code for an accompanying Web site. The code and instructions for using it are located on the inside back cover of each book. Once you establish a personal account, you will have continuous access throughout the life of the seventh edition of the *MLA Handbook*.

New to this edition, the Web site provides enhanced ways of consulting, learning, and searching the contents of the *MLA Handbook*. You will find the full text of the print volume on the site, as well as over two hundred examples that do not appear in print. The site also presents several research project narratives, with sample papers, illustrating the steps successful students take in researching and writing papers. Each research project narrative shows about thirty steps in the preparation of a paper for an instructor. The steps are linked to sections in the *MLA Handbook*, so you can move easily between the specific situation encountered by the student and the general topic discussed in the *MLA Handbook*. Similarly, if you are reading a section in the *MLA Handbook*, you can go directly to any steps in the research project narratives that illustrate the topic of that section. You might, for example, want to look at how several students approach the problem of defining a topic as you read section 1.3, "Selecting a Topic." The sample papers demonstrate how the various steps in researching and writing culminate in a complete document. Examine the sample papers to identify strategies for organizing an argument and working with sources. The papers also serve as models for formatting the margins, line spacing, and other physical attributes of a printed paper. Each narrative shows the instructor's comments, which should help you understand the kinds of concerns instructors have and what you can learn from their reading of your work.

The Web site allows keyword searching of the entire site, including the full text of the *MLA Handbook*. There is also a section where frequently asked questions are answered.

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1 Research and Writing

1.1. The Research Paper as a Form of Exploration

1.2. The Research Paper as a Form of Communication

1.3. Selecting a Topic
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- 1.3.2. Finding an Appropriate Focus
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1.10. Language and Style

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1.1. THE RESEARCH PAPER AS A FORM OF EXPLORATION

Personal Essays and Research Papers

During your school career you have probably written many personal essays that presented your thoughts, feelings, and opinions and that did not refer to any other source of information or ideas. Some assignments, however, require us to go beyond our personal knowledge. We undertake research when we wish to explore an idea, probe an issue, solve a problem, or make an argument in relation to what others have written. We then seek out and use materials beyond our personal resources. The outcome of such an inquiry appears in the research paper. The term *research paper* describes a presentation of student research that may be in a printed, an electronic, or a multimedia format.

Types of Research

The research paper is generally based on a combination of primary research and secondary research. *Primary research* is the study of a subject through firsthand investigation, such as analyzing a literary or historical text, a film, or a performance; conducting a survey or an interview; or carrying out a laboratory experiment. Primary sources include statistical data, historical documents, and works of literature or art. *Secondary research* is the examination of studies that other researchers have made of a subject. Examples of secondary sources are articles and books about political issues, historical events, scientific debates, or literary works.

Using Secondary Research

Most academic papers depend at least partly on secondary research. No matter what your subject of study, learning to identify and analyze the work of other researchers will play a major role in your development as a student. The sorts of activities that constitute a research paper—discovering, assessing, and assimilating others' research and then articulating your own ideas clearly and persuasively—are at the center of the educational experience.

Combining Research and Original Ideas

Research increases your knowledge and understanding of a subject. Sometimes research will confirm your ideas and opinions; sometimes

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it will challenge and modify them. But almost always it will help to shape your thinking. Unless your instructor specifically directs you otherwise, your research paper should not merely review publications and extract a series of quotations from them. Rather, you should look for sources that provide new information, that helpfully survey the various positions already taken on a specific subject, that lend authority to your viewpoint, that expand or nuance your ideas, that offer methods or modes of thought you can apply to new data or subjects, or that furnish negative examples against which you wish to argue. As you use and scrupulously acknowledge sources, however, always remember that the main purpose of doing research is not to summarize the work of others but to assimilate and to build on it and to arrive at your own understanding of the subject.

Different Approaches to Research and Writing

A book like this cannot present all the profitable ways of doing research. Because this handbook emphasizes the mechanics of preparing effective papers, it may give you the mistaken impression that the process of researching and writing a research paper follows a fixed pattern. The truth is that different paths can and do lead to successful research papers. Some researchers may pursue a more or less standard sequence of steps, but others may find themselves working less sequentially. In addition, certain projects lend themselves to a standard approach, whereas others may call for different strategies. Keeping in mind that researchers and projects differ, this book discusses activities that nearly all writers of research papers perform, such as selecting a suitable topic, conducting research, compiling a working bibliography, taking notes, outlining, and preparing the paper.

Exploration and Discovery

If you are writing your first research paper, you may feel overwhelmed by the many tasks discussed here. This handbook is designed to help you learn to manage a complex process efficiently. As you follow the book's advice on how to locate and document sources, how to format your paper, and so forth, you may be tempted to see doing a paper as a mechanical exercise. But, ideally, writing a research paper is intellectually rewarding: it is a form of exploration that leads to discoveries that are new—at least to you if not to others. The mechanics of the research paper, important though they are, should never override

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the intellectual challenge of pursuing a question that interests *you* (and ultimately your reader). This pursuit should guide your research and your writing. Even though you are just learning how to prepare a research paper, you may still experience some of the excitement of developing and testing ideas that is one of the great satisfactions of research and scholarship.

Research Papers and Professional Writing

Skills derived from preparing research papers are by no means just academic. Many reports and proposals required in business, government, and other professions similarly rely on secondary research. Learning how to write a research paper, then, can help prepare you for assignments in your professional career. It is difficult to think of any profession that would not require you to consult sources of information about a specific subject, to combine this information with your ideas, and to present your thoughts, findings, and conclusions effectively.

1.2. THE RESEARCH PAPER AS A FORM OF COMMUNICATION

A research paper is a form of written communication. Like other kinds of nonfiction writing—letters, memos, reports, essays, articles, books—it should present information and ideas clearly and effectively. You should not let the mechanics of gathering source materials, taking notes, and documenting sources make you forget to apply the knowledge and skills you have acquired through previous writing experiences.

This handbook is a guide for the preparation of research papers. It is not a book about expository writing. (See A.2–4 for a selected list of useful books on usage, language, and style.) Nonetheless, no set of conventions for preparing a manuscript can replace lively and intelligent writing, and no amount of research and documentation can compensate for a poor presentation of ideas. Although you must fully document the facts and opinions you draw from your research, the documentation should only support your statements and provide concise information about the sources cited; it should not overshadow your own ideas or distract the reader from them.

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Writing Guides

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The *MLA Handbook* is published by the Modern Language Association, the authority on MLA documentation style. Widely adopted by universities, colleges, and secondary schools, the *MLA Handbook* gives step-by-step advice on every aspect of writing research papers, from selecting a topic to submitting the completed paper.

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