

MLA Guidelines for Literature Essays

The examples for in-text and works cited list citations are based upon the seventh edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*.

I. In-text Parenthetical Citations.

Many times, writers quote directly from a literary work to support or develop an interpretive claim. The length and type of quotation will determine formatting, spacing, and punctuation conventions the writer will follow. The examples below illustrate some common and important MLA-style guidelines:

Short stories, novels, and essays:

- A. If the prose quotation runs no more than four lines, set it off with quotation marks and incorporate it into the text with no special indentions or changes in margins. Place a period after the parenthetical citation at the end of the quotation.

Example A: Stephen Jay Gould explains that in most mammals and birds, “the upper jaw fuses to the skull: chewing, biting, and shouting move the mobile lower jaw against this stable brace”(29).

- B. If the prose quotation runs more than four lines, set it off from the rest of the paper by beginning the quotation on a new line, by indenting one inch or ten spaces from the left margin, and by typing it double-spaced. Do not set the quoted material apart with quotation marks. Use a colon (with rare exceptions) to introduce the quotation. A period will precede the parenthetical citation at the end of the lengthy direct quotation.

Example B: Stephen Jay Gould argues that arriving at clear distinctions or categorizations is extremely difficult:

Nature, in some respects, comes to us as continua, not as discrete objects with clear boundaries. One of nature’s many continua extends from colonies at one end to organisms at the other. Even the basic terms—organism and colony—have not precise and unambiguous definitions. We may, however, use the two criteria of our vernacular as a guide. We tend to call a biological object an organism if it maintains no permanent physical connections with others and if its parts are so well integrated that they work

only in coordination and for the proper function of the whole. (93)

Poetry:

- A. If you quote part or all of an entire line of a poem, set it off with quotation marks and incorporate the line into the paper with no special indentions or changes in margins. Place a period after the parenthetical citation, noting the line number, at the end of the quotation.

Example A: Seamus Heaney writes that what the mother of the groom recalls “Is his glistening back” (2).

- B. If you quote up to two-three lines of a poem, use a slash(/) to indicate separations between lines. Set the direct quotation off with quotation marks and incorporate the lines into the paper with no special indentions or changes in margins. Place a period after the parenthetical citation, noting the line numbers, at the end of the quotation.

Example B: Seamus Heaney captures the mother’s feelings about losing her son when he writes that “It’s as if he kicked when lifted/And slipped her soapy hold” (7-8).

- C. If you quote more than three lines of a poem, begin the quotation on a new line in the paper. Indent each line one inch or ten spaces from the left margin (*unless the poem involves unusual spacing that must be represented on the page*). Do not set the indented lines off with quotation marks. A period will precede the parenthetical citation—assuming the last quoted line ends in a period (see Example D, below).

Example C: Heaney’s “Mother of the Groom” is rich in details that convey the mother’s status:

Once soap would ease off

The wedding ring

That’s bedded forever now

In her clapping hand. (9-12)

- D. If you need to preserve unusual spacing the poet uses to arrange the original lines, reproduce the unusual spacing as accurately as possible. Furthermore, when a quotation begins in the middle of a line of poetry, the partial line should be positioned where it is in the original poem, rather than being aligned with block quotations on the left margin.

Example D:

E. E. Cummings uses form to underscore the carefree feeling he associates with the season:

it's
spring
and
the
goat-footed
balloonMan whistles
far
and
wee (16-24)

NOTE: In citing longer or classic poems, omit page numbers altogether and cite by division (canto, book, part) and line. If you are citing only line numbers, initially use the word *line* or *lines*, then, having established that the numbers refer to lines rather than to pages, use the numbers alone.

Drama:

If you quote dialogue between two or more characters in a play, set the quotation off from the rest of the page and indicate each speaker by including the character's name in capital letters. Place a period after the character's name and begin the quotation. Each time the dialogue shifts to a new speaker, indent one inch or ten spaces from the left margin. However, if a character's speech extends beyond a single line, indent the second and subsequent lines *within* each character's speech an additional quarter inch. (Instructions and quote example based on *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, Seventh Edition*.)

Example:

Marguerite Duras's screenplay for *Hiroshima mon amour* suggests at the outset the profound difference between observation and experience:

HE. You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing.

SHE. I saw *everything. Everything....* The hospital, for instance, I saw it. I'm sure I did. There is a hospital in Hiroshima. How could I help seeing it?

HE. You did not see the hospital in Hiroshima. You saw nothing in Hiroshima. (2505-06)

A short time later Lear loses the final symbol of his former power, the soldiers who make up his train:

GONERIL. Hear me, my lord.

What need you five-and-twenty, ten or five,

To follow in a house where twice so many

Have a command to tend you?

REGAN. What need one?

LEAR. O, reason not the need! (2.4. 254-58)

Note: Classic verse plays are cited by division (act, scene) and line with periods between. Page numbers are omitted altogether. Some faculty will prefer you use Roman numerals rather than Arabic numbers: (*King Lear* 4.1) or (*King Lear* IV.i).

Stage directions are treated the same as any other quoted material within the quote and reproduced as accurately as possible to the original unless they do not fit the context of your sentence. In that case an ellipsis can replace the stage direction to keep the grammatical sense of your sentence.

II. Selected Examples of Bibliographical Entries

Works in Anthologies:

Many times, writers refer to short stories, critical essays, poems or plays that are published in a course anthology such as the *Bedford Guide to Literature*, commonly used in Niagara University's ENG 100 course. To compose such an entry in an MLA-style works cited list for a work in an anthology, follow the example below:

Hansberry, Lorraine. *A Raisin in the Sun*. *The Bedford Introduction to Literature Reading, Thinking, Writing*. Ed. Michael Meyer. 6th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2002. 1197-1230. Print.

Note: Play titles are in italics, but titles of short stories, poems or essays would be in quotations.

Web Sites:

The citation for a short work from a website should include the following elements:

- The author
- The title of the Short Work
- The title of the Web Site
- The sponsor of the Web Site
- The publication, posting or update date (n.d. if there is no date)
- Medium
- Date of access

One example of how a Works Cited entry for a short work on a website MIGHT look like this:

Jenkins, Henry. "Bearings." *MIT Communications Forum*. MIT, 19 Feb. 2002. Web.
16 June 2005.

NOTE: Both update date and date of access are done European style: day month year. (E.g. 12 June 2005). In-text, parenthetical citations for web sites should name the author if known, or the first words of the title in quotations in the reference. Unless faculty choose otherwise, page numbers are usually not included unless the work is a PDF where page numbers of original source are given.

