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How to Do Basic MLA Page Formatting

This quick guide explains the basics of MLA page formatting, and it does so in the form of an MLA-style paper. It's trippy, we know. Whether you read this "paper" or just study the look of it, we hope you can get a good idea of what the Modern Language Association (MLA for short) recommends. There are a lot of little details to cover, but they'll become second nature with practice, so let's jump in and learn about the fundamentals of MLA formatting.

According to the *MLA Handbook*, papers should have one-inch margins all around (1). Thankfully, those margins are the default in MS Word and Google Docs. The MLA also recommends you use an easy-to-read font "between 11 and 13 points, unless your instructor specifies a different font size," and keep it consistent "throughout the paper" (*MLA Handbook* 1). This guide uses size-12 Times New Roman, which is a good option and thoroughly traditional.

As for spacing and indentation, double-space the whole paper, align your text with the left margin, indent the first line of each paragraph by half an inch, and insert only one space after a period (*MLA Handbook* 2). Both MS Word and Google Docs have settings to double-space your text automatically, and the default in both is left-aligned text. Sometimes, these programs insert extra space between paragraphs. Change the line-spacing settings if this happens.

In addition to the margins, font, and spacing guidelines, the MLA offers guidance on the information that should appear on the first page of your paper. The *MLA Handbook* states that you should provide your name, your instructor's name, your course's name and number, and the

paper's submission date, in that order and each on its own line in the top left of the first page (2). On the line after the submission date, write your paper's title, centered and without any bolding, underlining, italics, or quotation marks (2-3). If your paper is a group project, then place all this information on a cover page (3). See the last page of this guide for an example.

Starting on the first page, your paper should also have a running head, which should consist of your surname and the page number aligned to the right margin and placed half an inch from the top of the page (*MLA Handbook* 4). This guide has a running head in the top right of each page. In both MS Word and Google Docs, you can insert page numbers and then double-click the header area on the page to type your surname next to the number.

If you quote or paraphrase a source in your paper, the *MLA Handbook* states that your paper should have a works-cited list, which gets its own page at the end of your paper and should have the centered title "Works Cited" (5). The works-cited page should have one-inch margins and be double-spaced, and the first line of each entry should align with the left margin, but any lines after the first should be indented half an inch (5). Entries on the page should be in alphabetical order (219). See our handout titled "MLA Works-Cited Lists" for a sample work-cited page. If you need to do an annotated bibliography, then format it just like a works-cited page, title it "Annotated Bibliography" or "Annotated List of Works Cited," and indent your annotations one inch from the left margin (*MLA Handbook* 226). For a sample of an annotated bibliography, see page three of this guide.

Now that we've covered guidelines for margins, fonts, and spacing; the first page and running head; and the works-cited page, hopefully MLA formatting seems easier. If you have any questions about the MLA's formatting guidance or how to apply it to your paper, please ask a writing consultant. Thanks for reading this guide! Best of luck writing in MLA style!

Annotated Bibliography

“Formatting Your Research Project.” *MLA Style Center*, Modern Language Association of America, style.mla.org/formatting-papers. Accessed 14 July 2021.

This page is an online version of a section of the same title in the *MLA Handbook*. It contains detailed instructions for all aspects of page formatting, including all the guidelines cited in this sample paper.

MLA Handbook. 9th ed., Modern Language Association of America, 2021.

This source is the official authority on all things MLA style. It comes complete with chapters on formatting, punctuation, inclusive language, in-text citations, and works-cited lists. The narrative style can make finding citation examples a little difficult, but the new appendix of model citations in the ninth edition compensates for this somewhat.

“MLA Works-Cited Lists.” Yakima Valley College Writing Center. Handout.

This handout provides a concise explanation of the elements of an MLA works-cited entry, a variety of works-cited entry examples, and a sample works-cited list. It is useful as a quick reference.

“Sample Papers in MLA Style.” *MLA Style Center*, Modern Language Association of America, style.mla.org/sample-papers. Accessed 14 July 2021.

This page contains links to a handful of student papers in MLA format. According to the page, the papers “won the 2019 MLA Student Paper Contest” and have undergone a little editing. The samples should be excellent references for correct MLA page formatting as well as in-text citations and works-cited lists.

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The MLA Has You Covered: Example of an MLA Cover Page for a Group Project