PART 2--The Basics Of MLA Documentation

In the last section you learned that intellectual property--opinions, judgments, descriptions that are not common knowledge--needs to be cited.

But what does "cited" mean exactly?

A citation is like a little flag or sticker that you put on things that are not yours. It marks the information that doesn't belong to you so a reader can tell the difference between your words and ideas and your source's words and ideas. Making that difference clear is part of academic honesty. **What's not yours needs a flag.** What's yours or common knowledge should not be flagged.

What does a citation look like?

A citation in MLA documentation is a set of parenthesis with information in it. Why parenthesis? The citation is trying not to draw attention to itself, to intrude only slightly. Here's what a citation looks like--in red here for instructional emphasis, but yours will be black and subtle:

"Children who watch too much television are lulled into a dream state where creative thinking perishes. After a couple of hours, the *SpongeBob SquarePants* theme music becomes a funeral march for the child's deceased imagination" *(Abbott 112).*

As a "flag" the citation serves two purposes:

- it indicates that what comes before it is someone else's intellectual property--in this case a direct quote that is not common knowledge and that uses a creative metaphor (TV theme song = funeral march).
- it links up with that same word—Abbott—on the Works Cited page, where much more information about the source is listed. Using this information, your reader could, hypothetically, locate the same source to use in his or her paper. We'll talk about Works Cited pages a little later.

What goes in the parenthesis?

There's just not room between sentences for much information, so the citation itself is brief. Like a computer browser, a citation has a "default setting." It's default setting is the **author and page number** of the source you are using. If you are
using information from page 402 in a book by James Harris, the citation in MLA format would look like this:

"More than any other singer, Paul Rodgers is the seminal vocalist of the 20th century" (Harris 402).

But what if my source has two or three authors?

Include both in the citation. EX: "Students with excessive absences in school often have greater problems than just missing class lectures. Often these kids are dealing with issues like abuse and incest, rather than just playing hooky to have a free day" (Harmon and Bellairs 45).

What if I have more than three authors?

Use the Latin phrase "et. al" after the first author's name to indicate there are many authors. The phrase means "and others."

In the paper: “What the study reveals in that blah blah blah” (Wournos, et al. 33).

On the Works Cited page:


What does NOT go in a citation?

Anything--except page numbers--that appears at the end of the Works Cited Entry:

- publisher names NO: (Harcourt Brace)
- website addresses NO: (www.wipo.org)
- journal or magazine name NO: (People Weekly) (College English)
- volume/issue numbers NO: (volume 66, issue 5)
- dictionary or encyclopedia names NO: (World Book Encyclopedia)
- the word "page" or "p." NO: (Miller page 88)

What's a signal phrase?

A signal phrase comes before a borrowed quote or idea. It lets a reader know that someone else--other than the writer of the paper--is about to speak. The signal
phrase might also give a person's occupation or field of expertise to help justify their presence in your paper.

EX:

**Novelist Nell Hindman feels that the best suspense stories involve ordinary people:** "What's more suspenseful than an ordinary character--much like the reader--who gets sucked into a mystery? The more ordinary the character, the stronger his connection to the reader" (12). Citation has only page number because last name was given in signal phrase.

**According to Dr. E. B. Jenkins, D.C.,** "There are ways other than traditional medicine and surgery to treat pain. Even people who have chronic symptoms have found effective relief through alternative options like acupuncture and chiropractic, most of which do not involve invasive procedures. Most of my patients say they would rather not undergo surgery at all if they can manage or eliminate pain another way. I am pleased to offer them that option" (7).

**What if I don't have an author or page numbers on my article?**

You can still use the information. Read the following passage:

*from “Why Diesel is the Way to Go”*

Vehicles powered by diesel engines are the most fuel-efficient on the market today. They burn 30 percent less fuel than their unleaded counterparts, meaning they get more miles to the gallon. They are also more powerful. Since they produce higher torque at low engine speeds, drivers have an easier time merging into traffic, accelerating onto the highway, passing slow moving vehicles, pulling trailers and climbing hills. Diesel engines are also more environmentally friendly, as they produce 25 percent less harmful carbon dioxide emissions.

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Here are **three acceptable ways** to cite information from an article with no author or page numbers, only a title:

**A**—attribute quote to article title in the text / no citation

According to the article “Why Diesel is the Way to Go,” diesel engines “produce 25 percent less harmful emissions” than engines that run on unleaded gas.
No citation because there’s no author or page number to go in there.

B—use shortened title in citation

When compared to engines that run on unleaded gas, diesel engines “produce 25 percent less harmful emissions” (“Why Diesel”).

C—use shortened title with paragraph number in citation—works well for those who like to have a number in the citation.

When compared to engines that run on unleaded gas, diesel engines “produce 25 percent less harmful emissions” (“Why Diesel,” par. 3).

What is the Works Cited page?

The Works Cited page is just what it says it is: a list of sources (works) you took intellectual property from to write your paper. Omit from the list any source you reviewed but did not take quotes or paraphrases from.

The Works Cited page

- is **arranged alphabetically** by author (use title in quotation marks in place of author if none is given).
- uses hanging indentation (all lines after the first are **indented 5 spaces**).
- uses a different **standard model** for each kind of source (book, newspaper, interview) Please identify the source as either a "Print" source or a "Web" source (most are one or the other, but "CD" and "Film" are a few of the other classifications).

Here's a sample entry for a book:

Lastname, Firstname. *Title of Book*. Place of Publication: Publisher, Year of Publication. Print.


Here's one for a journal article:


Here's one for a newspaper article:

Author(s). "Title of Article." *Title of Periodical* Day Month Year: pages. Print.


Here's a sample Works Cited page:

**Note that every line after the first is indented 5 spaces** (hanging indentation) and the list is alphabetized. The whole thing is double spaced.

Works Cited


What about electronic sources? Web sources are identified by the word "Web," and do not usually include a URL (http address) unless there is no other way to locate the information.

EX:

The first *Newsweek* in italics is the publication; the second is the publisher or sponsor of the site, which in this case is also Newsweek.

Oct. 8th is the date the article was posted. If you don't have this information, indicate this using "n.d." for "no date."

January 3rd is the date you accessed the information. If you print a copy from the internet, the date should be on the bottom right corner of the page you printed.

Is there any special way my paper should be formatted?

YES. Each style of documentation has its own preferences, so ask your professor if you're not sure. But students in English classes usually use MLA format. What that means is that you use an information block at the top left corner like this:

FirstName LastName

Professor's name

Class

Date (ex: 9 June 2011)

Double-space after the date, center the title. Do not do anything special to the title—no bold, no underlining, no italicizing, no "all caps."

The whole paper should be double-spaced with 1-inch margins all around the page. All pages—including the first—are numbered.

Why are there so many rules to MLA? Why can I just do it the way I want to as long as I get the right information in the paper? Going into a McDonald’s restaurant in any country is essentially the same as it is here in Columbus, GA—same colors, same large counter, same company logos, generally the same food prepared the same way, tasting the same as here. How can McDonald’s pull this off? It is called **standardization**. There’s ONE way to make a Big Mac, so no matter who is making the sandwich in what part of the world, it is always the same. Customers of the franchise expect consistency, not wild variations in toppings and preparation from store to store.

The same applies to writing papers for a particular field. There has to be a standard way to do it. For those in the humanities, that means learning MLA documentation
and formatting. It stops people from submitting papers in 40-point purple “kiddie” font with four-inch margins. Can you imagine having to read that? Or having as many citation styles to figure out as there are writers? How can anyone tell if a paper is correct when there is no accepted model to compare it to? Fortunately, MLA gives us that standard so everyone in the field has the same set of guidelines and models to follow.

This seems like a lot of work. Can I just write papers that do not consult sources?

It is a lot of work the first time through, but it will get easier as you complete more papers and more of it becomes second nature. Hang in there!

You can not learn much by writing only what you already know. There is no learning in that, either for you or for the readers of your papers. It is never a “real” research paper unless you are grounding your paper in (or sometimes rejecting) what has been published before. Fields advance by publishing research that is read, discussed, and reacted to. This is often how new knowledge is created in your field, and you can add to it if you know how to put your ideas in a standard form.

What follows is some information to help you understand why you have to/should do research for critical essays about creative works.

A primary source is the work you are writing about. You might have several primary sources if you are writing about a group of poems, for instance.

A secondary source is written about the primary source. These are usually articles where a writer has noticed a theme in a work or imagery or has made some interesting connection to another work. The people who write these articles are called critics. A critic’s attention is usually regarded as a “thumbs up” regarding the seriousness and craft of the work, even if the review is not positive.

The articles that are written about these works are called literary criticism, but don’t be fooled by the word “criticism.” It doesn’t mean to find fault with a work or to belittle the writer (though some might). It simply means “evaluation.”

The field of literary criticism is like a conversation has been going on year after year after year, first with one or two people “talking” about a literary work through their articles, then others joining in as more and more critics take up this conversation and find it interesting or worthy of adding their voices.
Those who write on a piece of work are expected to do their homework by seeing what else has written on the work. It’s like walking up to a circle of people on the street and listening to and thinking about what had already been said before jumping in. Or reading the original post on Facebook and all the existing posts before jumping in at the bottom with a post of your own. This shows courtesy to those who have time and thought already invested in the conversation. Critics often frame their arguments in the context of *previous* critics, usually either in support of or in contrast to, just as some people do on Facebook.

**IMPORTANT**: What you add to the conversation should not just be reactions against or for others say. You should have your own ideas about the work that you got when you spent time reading and thinking about it. Come up with your own reading of the work and have your own ideas. That’s what people want to hear: new ideas that become part of the conversation.

**How You Can Use the Techniques and Language of Critics**

You too can discuss in the intro how the focus of your paper fits in with—or maybe stands in opposition to—what the critics have already said. It’s a great way to let the reader know you take research seriously and want to ground what you say in the existing scholarly research.

EX: Critics have said “x” (Smuther 12) and “z” (Keating and Westin 288), but I say ___________________ (thesis that rejects or is slightly more pointed than the existing criticism).

It’s great when a source aligns exactly with what you are trying to prove. Say your thesis is that Frost uses snow as a symbol for death in his poems. Then you find three or four good, credible sources that seem to support this idea. Understand that this is the exception, not the rule. (In some cases, when all the sources you come across fall in line with your thesis without much effort, that might be an indication that your thesis is too factual, too much like common knowledge. EX: Making your thesis “This poem is a sonnet” and then every source confirming that. But this is not a thesis that needs proving anyway—back to the drawing board.)

Most often, you will have to make connections and points on your own and not rely on a source to do that. You will become good at making a feast from scraps.

Because you have spent time with these texts enough to have some authority with them, you don’t always have to bow to the critics. You can **disagree with them** if you wish. Quote the critic, then show how your claim/focus is more logical, better
thought out, and so forth. In this way, you are pushing against what has been said already, not leaning on it for support. This is a fairly sophisticated way to use a source and requires strong critical thinking. Don’t attempt unless you have clear, logical points against your source’s line of thinking.

EX: Your source says snow is a peaceful, positive symbol and points to several poems where animals and people seem swaddled in snow. You quote this part, attributing the idea to the source. Then come in behind that statement and call into question the notion of swaddling. You say no, it’s more like *smothering* and quote a line from the poem that actually uses that word. Clearly, you say, the critic is ignoring the negative tones that Frost is creating. The connotations of the words suggest snow = death, not snow = comfort. In this way you make points by pushing off of criticism that you believe has it wrong.

Another way you can use sources is to **build on the critic’s argument**, going farther than the source does. Just make sure you can tell what ideas belong to you and which belong to the source. It has to be very clear who owns what.

EX: Your source says snow is a negative symbol in Frost’s work but stops there. So in your paper, you intro the critics’ idea and quote or paraphrase the point he or she makes, making sure to give the source the credit for the idea. Then you will go on to say that you agree it’s a negative symbol, but you think it’s negative because it’s a **symbol for death** (which is your thesis). See how your ideas go farther than the source’s?

**Other tricks of the trade**

1—Applying criticism about one work you do have criticism for (well-known) to the others in the set that you don’t have criticism for (new or obscure).

EX: Critic Jan Smith says Frost’s poem “Design” is “blah blah blah” (12). This could be said of “Poem 2” and “Poem 3” as well because blah blah blah.

2—Finding an interdisciplinary source to help make a point (ask professor before you use it).

EX: Finding a source that talks about the attitudes toward snow in various cultures. You find such a source and note that several cultures—specifically the ones that have to live in it without benefit of heat—usually view snow negatively and associate it with death because many freeze or starve during the winter. Use this!
ARE YOU READY FOR QUIZ 2? IF SO, CLICK ON THAT LINK IN THE MENU TO YOUR LEFT.

If not, go back and review this section. You must get all 10 questions correct (100%) to successfully complete this part of the tutorial.