

# WRITING IN MLA

## THE REASONS BEHIND THE WORK

### THE PURPOSE OF AN ESSAY:

I know that sometimes essay assignments are a lot of work and stress. Believe it or not, there is a legitimate reason for them. Sometimes an essay can show what you've learned better than a test can. An essay assignment can give you the time you need to prove that you've been **thinking** the information through, to show that you truly **understand** what you've been learning, and to **test** your knowledge about its implications. This is why the argument you present, your claims, reasons, and supporting evidence, are so important. Writing an essay gives you time to keep improving the ideas you want to express *and* the way you express them. Once you understand the purpose of essay assignments, then understanding the reason for their formatting and citation will be easier.

- If you're having troubles editing your writing to make your ideas clear (don't we all?), take a look at [the Potsdam College Writing Center's self-editing guide](#). This will provide you with some tips in how to make your essay more readable and more convincing, along with a review of a few common errors and links to helpful websites. And come in for a consultation in the CWC.

### The Purpose of Formatting

Although formatting may seem useless, it's not. It may not be directly helpful to you, but it is for the reader and the teacher. If information is muddled and confusing, and the paper's aesthetics (how it "looks") seem disorganized, the reader (or teacher) is already expecting the writing to be equally disorganized. So when the formatting looks clean and slick, people expect better writing and can concentrate on finding it. It boosts your **credibility** as a writer.

## The Purpose of Citation

**Every time** you use any source, cite in-text. By showing the author and page number after the sentence or sentences in which you use their material, you help convince your reader that you are credible and have a good knowledge base for your paper. It shows your professor that you're utilizing the readings and gaining experience with the topics. As the teacher reads, s/he will "hop" from your in-text citation to the bibliography (or works cited list) to learn more about each source.

Regardless of whether it's helpful or not, citation is required, and if not applied, it can have **consequences**. Students who don't cite well can be disciplined or expelled; see the Potsdam Academic Honor Code, part C. If you have any questions about citation or its use, ask your professor and the CWC, and save yourself the hassle.

Here are **some awesome websites** that outline the basics and guide you through the specifics of MLA citation. Don't think this will be the only time you see them. I link to these same sites in other parts of this tutorial, too, because they can help you cite and format well. Please help yourself and use them.

- **Note!** You can also find the links to these sites from the [CWC website](#) and the [Potsdam College Libraries website](#).
- [Diana Hacker](#)
- [Purdue Owl](#)
- [Cite Source](#)

# So... How do I begin?

**Be sure to read your teacher's assignment carefully for clues, directions, and requirements. Follow up with questions for your teacher. Here are the basic steps of organizing an essay:**

## **Research:**

Start by increasing your knowledge base of the general topic. Then, once you've educated yourself on the general topic, focus on your specific argument or claim. Once you have your claim, look for your sources. **HINT: An easy way to keep track of your sources is to add them to a bibliography as you find them.** If you find you get stuck making your topic specific, or if you are having trouble finding sources, contact [our college librarians](#) through the links you'll see at the left of the webpage—ask a question, make a research appointment, or contact the 24/7 service.

## **Develop a Thesis:**

Create your argument through your thesis and critically consider your topic. A thesis is a statement that explains the concept or position that you're going to discuss in your paper. It's the **core idea** that someone should understand after they've read the essay. Even when you're not writing an argumentative essay, you'll still have that core idea that you want to get across—that's your thesis. The thesis statement is usually clearly expressed in one sentence, but you will build up to it and explain it with additional sentences.

From your thesis, create the main points that prove or support your thesis. These are the **secondary ideas** that help the reader understand and possibly agree with your core idea.

### **Example**

Thesis: Plagiarism is easy to do.

MP #1: Paraphrasing can be too similar to the original.

MP #2: Incorrect or lack of in-text citation can cause anybody to plagiarize.

MP #3: Not referencing sources correctly can confuse your reader.

**Keep in mind** that you don't always have to start with the final thesis statement that you're going to put in your paper. You can use what we call the "poser thesis" (others, including your teachers, might call it a "working thesis"). A poser thesis is a general statement about your topic that you use to create your main points. It's temporary, and you'll just use it while you're outlining and drafting. Then, once you've fully developed your claims, you'll go back and write a new, more specific thesis. This allows more cohesive logic and more thorough connections between your thesis and your supporting points.

### **Organize Your Paper:**

The basic format of a paper has three parts:

- I. Introduction: Introduce your topic using the general subject, and then narrow your focus to your thesis. The general rule of thumb is that your thesis statement should be the last sentence in your introduction.
- II. Body: In the body, you provide your argument in main points explained in order. And also be careful to outline your points so that they don't contradict each other and so you're sure they all connect to your thesis. Show the connection between ideas by transitioning between points. As you explain each point, provide reasons why it's valid and evidence/examples to illustrate what you mean.
- III. Conclusion: This is just a summary of your argument (AKA, your thesis and main points again). You can express them in a slightly more complicated manner now that your reader understands where you're coming from. Basically, you're telling the reader the things you want them to take away from your piece—people tend to remember the last thing they read the best. You can also explain why your argument matters. **However**, be sure not to introduce new ideas or information in the conclusion!

### **Write it:**

Remember to cite, noting what source and what page you used, and make sure you aren't plagiarizing through poorly written paraphrases and lack of quoting.

**For more help** on organizing your paper, check out [Writing Commons](#). It's an open-text, online book about developing your essays, organizing your writing, and doing research.

# ✓ **MLA FORMAT**



## **Starting the Paper:**

Before your actual paper, you need to include a header on the right side of the page. In the header, insert your last name and page number.

Smith 1

## **Formatting Your Paper:**

After inserting the header, change the margins to 1" all the way around. You'll also need to check the spacing—you'll want the lines double spaced, with no extra space before or after the paragraphs. Finally, change the font to Times New Roman or another classic font, size 12.

Next, format your information. On the top left, write: your name, the professor's name, the class title, and the date (Day Month Year).

Smith 1

Sam Smith

Professor Thomas

English 101

17 March 2012

- *Note! The spacing here is a little bit off, because we're not actually using the whole page. But you get the idea...*

## **Formatting the Title:**

The title should be centered, with its subtitle immediately following.

- *Note! With titles in MLA, every significant word must be capitalized.*

Smith 1

Sam Smith

Professor Thomas

English 101

17 March 2012

The Personal Harms of Drug Use and Its Environmental Effects on Others:

A Global View

**Formatting the Text:**

The text of your essay should start immediately after the title (or subtitle, if you have one). It should be left-justified, with no spaces between paragraphs. The first line of each paragraph should be indented 0.5”.

**When your formatting is complete, it should look like this:**

Smith 1

Sam Smith

Professor Thomas

English 101

17 March 2012

The Personal Harms Of Drug Use And Its Environmental Effects on Others:

A Global View

Under the study of sociology, one of the most well research topics is the use and effects of recreational and illegal drug use. It is a very common issue in...

## Formatting Works Cited:

After you format the rest of the paper, you'll still need to do the bibliography (or works cited list, as it's called in MLA). The bib should be on the first full page after your essay ends. Here are the basic formatting steps:

1. The text should still be double-spaced, and you should leave the header with your name and the page number at the top of the page.
2. Label the page "Works Cited" in the top center.
3. On the next line, justify the text to the left, but with a hanging indent\* of 0.5".
4. Enter the full bibliography information for all of your sources.

**\*Q:** How do I get Word to format hanging indents?

**A:** If you go under "Format" to "Paragraph," beneath the title of "Indentation" on the left there is a "Special" drop down list where you can choose "hanging" indent.

Here's an example of a works cited page:

Works Cited

Gleick, James. *Chaos: Making a New Science*. New York: Penguin, 1987. Print.

Langhamer, Claire. "Love and Courtship in Mid-Twentieth-Century England."  
*Historical Journal* 50.1 (2007): 173-96. *ProQuest*. Web. 27 May 2009.

- *Note! Remember that this isn't the correct page width, so your works cited will look a little different.*

To see a full **example paper**, check out the example research papers at [Purdue Owl](#) and [Diana Hacker](#).

## Optional Activity

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Format a page for a MLA essay, including:

- Header
- Personal Information
- Title
- Text format

If assigned, turn this sheet in to your professor, or bring it to the College Writing Center for a tutor to look over with you.



Index of Websites  
(in order listed in this tutorial)

[“The Potsdam College Writing Center’s Self-Editing Guide”](#)

<http://www.potsdam.edu/support/cwc/upload/Self-Editing-Guide-for-Potsdam-Students.pdf>

[“Diana Hacker”](#)

[http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/resdoc5e/RES5e\\_ch08\\_o.html](http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/resdoc5e/RES5e_ch08_o.html)

[“Purdue Owl”](#)

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>

[“Cite Source”](#)

<http://citesource.trincoll.edu/mla/index.html>

[“our college librarians”](#)

<http://www.libraries.potsdam.edu/contact/index.html>

[“Writing Commons”](#)

<http://writingcommons.org/open-text>

[“Diana Hacker’s MLA example research paper”](#)

<http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/resdoc5e/pdf/Hacker-Orlov-MLA.pdf>

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