

## MLA Format Guidelines: FAQ

### What is formatting?

Formatting allows you to change the *way* in which people view what you have created. All types of art, written works, even scientific calculations have formats. Formats (also called *conventions*) are used to help communicate a message effectively and to provide consistency in a particular industry. Part of being in a community of educated people involves knowing the rules of communication in that community.

What would happen if you were a web designer and didn't know how to talk about HTML? Or if you were a scientist and didn't know how to write up lab reports to share your findings of an experiment? Your coworkers and colleagues would have a hard time understanding the information that you are trying to share with them.

Formatting does not change what you have said (the content), what it does change is the *look* of what is said.

All **bears** are hairy.

*All bears are hairy*  
All bears are hairy.

*All bears are hairy*

All bears are hairy.

ALL BEARS ARE HAIRY

### What is MLA format?

The Modern Language Association (MLA) is an academic formatting standard; that is it is used exclusively in writing academic papers regardless of the content or level of academic complexity. IADT uses the MLA system in the paper formatting and the citing of sources (more to come on this later). While individual teachers may modify this standard to meet their own needs, this list of formatting dos and don'ts will give you a starting place common to all classes.

### When should I use MLA format?

You should use MLA format on any academic report paper (i.e. paper assigned in any school course) that is required to be typed and does not fit another paper format. Examples of papers that should be formatted in MLA style: English class essays, general reports on artists, computer software, product or company evaluations, research reports in any class. Most academic classes will require at least one paper during the quarter, so it is important to learn these guidelines well.

### Should I ever not use MLA format?

Just as with everything in life, there is a proper time to use MLA and a time when another format is more acceptable. For example when writing a business letter, it should look like a letter and not like an essay. When writing a proposal for graphic services it will have a

different format as is common in the industries that use proposals. Certainly books are formatted differently than academic papers. Even this FAQ sheet isn't formatted in MLA style! The key is to use the right format at the right time. Once again, the MLA is an *academic style* and should be used with *academic papers*. If you have questions as to what format to create your papers in, your teacher will be happy to help you.

### **Why was the MLA format created?**

The MLA has helped students, teachers, and scholars alike find certain pieces of information within papers that they are reading by creating a consistent system of documentation and layout.

For example, when reading a paper documented in MLA style about the differences in hybrid engines from traditional fuel engines, I read the following text “Hybrid engines are expected to increase in the market share of automotive sales in the next five years by 30% (Bernard 34).”

I know because of the quotation marks that the information is borrowed (originally written) from somewhere else. If I wanted to read more about the projections for the sales of hybrid automotives, I may want to read the original information that the author used for this paper. MLA documentation points me in the right direction. I know that the author had taken some information from a source whose author's last name was “Bernard” and that I can find the information relating to this quote on page 34 because of the in-text citing (Bernard 34). But I still don't know where to find the article or book . . . so I flip to the back of the paper and look at the list of sources that the author has included for my reference (called a “Works Cited” page).

Here I find a list of entries organized alphabetically by the author's last name. When I find “Bernard” I can see exactly where the author got her information . . . John Bernard, *Automotive Digest*, Issue 49, January 2000. I wonder if the information that the author used is still correct? This article was written several years ago. Has the trend in buying lived up to the expectations? By evaluating the sources the author used in his or her article I can decide whether or not I should trust the information in the paper.

Another more technical reason MLA standards are used is to make papers easy to read for instructors. Double-spacing, for example, allows the instructor to write comments in the margins and to correct errors within the text itself. It also helps students, who are revising their own work or who are helping with each other's works by allowing them to write their suggestions or changes next to the area that needs to be changed.

This document is still under construction. Please submit other questions in an e-mail to [lwimberly@iadt.edu](mailto:lwimberly@iadt.edu) for updated versions of this FAQ. In the subject line include the text “MLA FAQ addition.”