

# MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers

**FIFTH EDITION**

Joseph  
Gibaldi

# MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers

*Fifth Edition*

Joseph Gibaldi

THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION  
OF AMERICA

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The Modern Language Association publishes two books on its documentation style: the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (for high school and undergraduate students) and the *MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing* (for graduate students, scholars, and professional writers). These volumes provide the most accurate and complete instructions on MLA style.

If updates of the information in this handbook become necessary, they will be posted at the MLA's World Wide Web site (<http://www.mla.org/>).

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# Foreword

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The *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* is designed to introduce you to the customs of a community of writers who greatly value scrupulous scholarship and the careful documentation, or recording, of research. Read from beginning to end, the *MLA Handbook* provides a comprehensive picture of how research papers are created. Once you are familiar with the contents, you can use the book as a reference tool. Chapter 1 suggests some of the educational and intellectual purposes of research and describes the first steps in a scholarly project: choosing a topic; using a library and the Internet; evaluating electronic sources; producing a working bibliography, notes, outlines, and drafts; and avoiding plagiarism. Chapter 2 gives practical advice on such matters as spelling, punctuation, and the presentation of names, numbers, titles of works, and quotations. This chapter is meant to help you craft writing that is clear, consistent, and stylistically authoritative. Chapter 3 gives guidelines on the physical format of the paper. The next two chapters cover the MLA's system, or style, of documenting print and electronic sources: chapter 4 explains how to list sources at the end of a paper, while chapter 5 shows how to cite them in the text of a paper. Chapter 6 describes abbreviations that are useful in documentation and in certain other contexts. Appendix A lists notable reference works in specialized fields; appendix B presents some systems of documentation other than the MLA's. Finally, there are sample pages of a research paper that illustrate MLA style.

Learning the rules the *MLA Handbook* outlines will help you become a writer whose work deserves serious consideration. Similarly, your study of these rules can make you a more discerning reader: knowing how an author is supposed to use sources is essential to judging a text's reliability.

If you are consulting this book for the first time, you may be surprised by its focus on the details of preparing a piece of writing. This concern with details grows out of a respect for the responsibilities writers have to readers—and to other writers. The general practices the *MLA Handbook* describes are followed by writers of studies and reports that serve the needs of many different readers, in government, business, industry, the professions, the academy, and the media.

Because research has the power to affect opinions and actions, responsible writers compose their work with great care. They specify when they refer to another author's ideas, facts, and words, whether they want to agree with, object to, analyze, or interpret the source. This kind of documentation tends to discourage the circulation of error, by inviting readers to determine for themselves whether a reference to another text presents a reasonable account of what that text says.

The *MLA Handbook* was developed by the Modern Language Association of America (MLA), an organization of teachers and scholars founded in 1883, when the modern languages were just beginning to gain a place in the college curriculum alongside the classical languages—ancient Greek and Latin. The MLA now has over thirty thousand members and supports a variety of publications and activities designed to strengthen teaching and scholarship in languages and literature. One of the association's best-known publications, the *MLA Handbook* has been widely used by generations of students at colleges and universities throughout the United States and in other countries. The documentation style the book outlines is preferred by a substantial majority of scholarly journals in languages and literature.

The *MLA Handbook* originated nearly fifty years ago. Convinced that commonly agreed-on rules for documenting quotations, facts, opinions, and paraphrases would simplify the task of preparing a manuscript for publication, William Riley Parker, the MLA executive director, compiled and published the “MLA Style Sheet” in 1951 in the association's journal, *PMLA*. The “Style Sheet” gained almost immediate acceptance among MLA members and scholarly publishers both because Parker codified uniform practices among journal editors and university presses and because he encouraged consensus on matters about which there was less agreement. The “Style Sheet” continued to respond to the changing needs of scholars, editors, and publishers and, in time, also addressed the needs of undergraduate students, becoming in 1977 the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. Over the years Walter S. Achtert, John Hurt Fisher, and Joseph Gibaldi contributed to the publication.

The second edition of the *MLA Handbook*, which appeared in 1984, introduced the current simplified set of rules for documentation that allow citations to be placed in the text within parentheses. Although the third edition, produced in 1988, covered some aspects of electronic publication, its treatment of these developments was quickly outdated. The fourth edition suffered a similar fate. Updated in 1995 before the World Wide Web came into broad use, it too required revi-

sion only a few years after it appeared. The book you hold, the fifth edition, not only encompasses recent technological changes but also includes guidelines for doing research on the Internet and for evaluating the reliability of Web sites.

You happen to be learning the ways of writers, scholars, libraries, and publishers at a time when preserving the vital legacy of print presents a growing challenge. Librarians and scholars are particularly concerned about preserving the “brittle” books and other documents published or written on the inexpensive acidic paper that began to be used in the mid-nineteenth century. If you have ever tried to save newspaper articles or if you enjoy browsing in secondhand bookstores, you have probably noticed how paper yellows and crumbles with age. Unless steps are taken to preserve the paper of books and periodicals or to reproduce their contents, these documents will be lost forever.

Large-scale photographing of brittle materials has been under way for some time, and the future study of them will be possible primarily through the use of photographs or electronic formats derived from photographs. Resources are insufficient, however, to guarantee the survival of all materials published or written on acidic paper from 1850 to the present, and many documents will disappear before your generation can consult them.

Preserving electronic records also presents problems. Recently librarians, scholars, foundation executives, heads of government agencies, and members of Congress have begun to grapple with the difficulties associated with preserving electronic communications and publications. You may have had the common experience of trying to retrieve a stored electronic document only to discover that it was unreadable because of changes in your computer hardware or software or because the disk containing the document was damaged. On a vastly greater scale, the same obstacles confront the effort to maintain the diverse electronic records a literate society produces and consults each day. The magnitude of this task, like that of preserving the print legacy, raises major financial, logistic, and public policy questions and may exceed the resources currently available for the work.

Adapting scholarly practices to electronic media is another historic challenge facing writers, publishers, scholars, and librarians as our society moves from a six-hundred-year-old print era to an electronic era. One important question debated by the members of the two MLA committees that oversaw the creation of the fourth and fifth editions of the handbook concerns how much information readers need in a

citation of an electronic work to be able to find the source. A reader who wishes to locate a book can take a few pieces of information—such as the author's name and the title—to a library or bookstore in this country and in many others and readily determine whether the volume is available. Publication practices, copyright laws, and the organization of libraries provide an infrastructure that makes locating print publications a relatively simple matter. Consequently, references to print sources can be brief. Because no comparable infrastructure yet exists for electronic publications, citations of them must provide more information than references to print sources normally contain.

A second question the two MLA committees discussed concerns the ease with which electronic communications and texts can be changed. This feature of electronic texts is an important strength of the new technology, but it poses problems for the documentation of research. By the time a reader tries to locate an electronic text referred to by an author, the text may have changed and the cited version may no longer exist or may be difficult to find. Sometimes the changes are planned and meant to enhance the publication. Consider, for example, the *MLA International Bibliography*. The association issues this reference work in print, as a CD-ROM, and online. The print volume is published annually, and each installment stands as a permanent record of the books and articles identified when it went to press. The CD-ROM version, however, is updated four times a year, and so the listings change quarterly; the online version is updated even more frequently—ten times a year. (Updating includes adding new entries and correcting errors in existing items.) Therefore, a student who consults an electronic version of the bibliography at different times in the year can end up with different lists of sources for a research assignment.

Regular additions to an electronic database do not pose a substantial problem as long as the user of the database understands that it will change. Greater problems arise from alterations that a writer or a reader cannot anticipate. An electronic document may be modified unpredictably, by its author or other interested parties.

The MLA committees that oversaw the creation of the fourth and fifth editions debated the value of ensuring that readers can get back to the texts a writer read and cited. Some committee members assumed that electronic documents would not—and need not—remain stable. Why, these specialists asked, shouldn't an improved version of a text be substituted for an earlier version whenever improvements are recognized? The other members of the committee replied, Who would



determine what constitutes an improvement, and how could readers assess the effects of a change on the substance or wording of a text? After considerable discussion, committee members agreed that electronic texts will and probably should change but that readers must be able to get back to the original texts (or “archival copies”) a writer consulted and cited. Ways must be found to archive electronic texts reliably at specific times in their history. A minimal standard is for electronic documents to be dated. In electronic research as in print research, only the ability of readers to verify an author’s use of a source can discourage the circulation of error. How this important goal will be achieved remains to be seen.

The fifth edition of the *MLA Handbook* covers the new media while continuing to supply authoritative guidelines on traditional publications. As you will see, the rules for citing electronic material that the MLA committees established are not presented as definitive, and they will surely change as the technology and practices governing electronic communication evolve.

Because the MLA is a membership association, all its projects are communal efforts. The collaborative work on the *MLA Handbook* is particularly far-reaching; the various editions have benefited for over forty years from the contributions of MLA committees and staff members, editors, scholars, librarians, teachers, and students. Overseeing the development of this edition were the members of two *MLA Handbook* committees: Wayne C. Booth, Marshall J. Brown, Wendy Chun, Anne Ruggles Gere, Joel D. Goldfield, James L. Harner, Susan Kallenbach, John W. Kronik, Ian Lancashire, and Cynthia L. Selfe. They brought to their work wisdom and experience, a respect for old and new technologies, and a strong commitment to the students who will use this book. The views of the members of the MLA Committee on Computers and Emerging Technologies in Teaching and Research also helped shape the revision.

A number of MLA staff members aided in the planning, writing, and design of this edition of the handbook. Joseph Gibaldi, director of book acquisitions and development, did the lion’s share of the revision, working with Martha Noel Evans, director of the MLA book publication program. Members of the MLA editorial department, headed by Judy Goulding, made several specific contributions. Elizabeth Holland enlarged and improved the section on punctuation for the fourth edition, Eric Wirth was the principal copyeditor, and Judith Altreuter coordinated the book’s design.



Of central importance in the development of the section on library research were the following librarians, who generously supplied information about resources and services in college and university libraries: Mary Beth Aust-Keefer, Paul Burnham, William Calhoon, Nancy Carter, Paul Doty, Kathryn Franco, Ellen Gilbert, Francisca Goldsmith, Susan Hockey, Robert Hohl, Kay Klayman, Naomi Lederer, Rosemary Little, Mary Sue Livingston, S. David Mash, Carol McAllister, James McPhee, Jill Miller, Elaine Misko, Ann Okerson, Val Ontell, Rona Ostrow, Catherine Palmer, Sarah Philips, John Price-Wilkins, Sharon Propas, Anne Marie Secord, Linda Sharp, Victoria Swinney, Susan Szasz, Linda TerHaar, Virginia Tiefel, Alan Wallace, Helene Williams, and James Wyatt.

The MLA also owes special thanks to library staff members at Fairleigh Dickinson University, Florham-Madison; the University of Findlay; Kean College; the New York Public Library; New York University; the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Northern Illinois University; and Union County College. Finally, I acknowledge the contributions of the many teachers who have assigned the *MLA Handbook* to students and who sent suggestions for improvements that we incorporated in this edition.

As you learn to guide your research by the rules outlined in the *MLA Handbook*, you will take your place in a community of writers who are sure to influence the development of new rules. In time, you too may identify ways of improving future editions of this book.

Phyllis Franklin  
*Executive Director*  
*Modern Language Association*

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