**MLA Citations: The Basics**

In MLA style, referring to the works of others in your text is done by using what is known as parenthetical citation. This method involves placing relevant source information in parentheses after a quote or a paraphrase.

**General Guidelines**

1. The source information required in a parenthetical citation depends (1.) upon the source medium (e.g. Print, Web, DVD) and (2.) upon the source’s entry on the Works Cited (bibliography) page.
2. Any source information that you provide in-text must correspond to the source information on the Works Cited page. More specifically, whatever signal word or phrase you provide to your readers in the text, must be the first thing that appears on the left-hand margin of the corresponding entry in the Works Cited List.

**In-Text Citations: Author-Page Style**

MLA format follows the author-page method of in-text citation. This means that the author's last name and the page number(s) from which the quotation or paraphrase is taken must appear in the text, and a complete reference should appear on your Works Cited page. The author's name may appear either in the sentence itself or in parentheses following the quotation or paraphrase, but the page number(s) should always appear in the parentheses, not in the text of your sentence. For example:

Wordsworth stated that Romantic poetry was marked by a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (263).

Romantic poetry is characterized by the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth 263).

Wordsworth extensively explored the role of emotion in the creative process (263).

Both citations in the examples above, (263) and (Wordsworth 263), tell readers that the information in the sentence can be located on page 263 of a work by an author named Wordsworth. If readers want more information about this source, they can turn to the Works Cited page, where, under the name of Wordsworth, they would find the following information:

Wordsworth, William. *Lyrical Ballads*. London: Oxford U.P., 1967. Print.

**In-text Citations for Print Sources with Known Author**

For Print sources like books, magazines, scholarly journal articles, and newspapers, provide a signal word or phrase (usually the author’s last name) and a page number. If you provide the signal word/phrase in the sentence, you do not need to include it in the parenthetical citation.

Human beings have been described by Kenneth Burke as "symbol-using animals" (3). Human beings have been described as "symbol-using animals" (Burke 3).

These examples must correspond to an entry that begins with Burke, which will be the first thing that appears on the left-hand margin of an entry in the Works Cited:

Burke, Kenneth. *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1966. Print.

**In-text Citations for Print Sources with No Known Author**

When a source has no known author, use a shortened title of the work instead of an author name. Place the title in quotation marks if it's a short work (e.g. articles) or italicize it if it's a longer work (e.g. plays, books, television shows, entire websites) and provide a page number.

We see so many global warming hotspots in North America likely because this region has “more readily accessible climatic data and more comprehensive programs to monitor and study environmental change . . . ” (“Impact of Global Warming” 6).

In this example, since the reader does not know the author of the article, an abbreviated title of the article appears in the parenthetical citation which corresponds to the full name of the article which appears first at the left-hand margin of its respective entry in the Works Cited. Thus, the writer includes the title in quotation marks as the signal phrase in the parenthetical citation in order to lead the reader directly to the source on the Works Cited page. The Works Cited entry appears as follows:

“The Impact of Global Warming in North America.” *GLOBAL WARMING: Early Signs*. 1999. Web. 23 Mar. 2009.

#### Electronic Sources

One online film critic stated that Fitzcarraldo is "...a beautiful and terrifying critique of obsession and colonialism" (Garcia, “Herzog: a Life”).

The Purdue OWL is accessed by millions of users every year. Its “MLA Formatting and Style Guide” is one of the most popular resources (Stolley et al.).

In the first example, the writer has chosen not to include the author name in-text; however, two entries from the same author appear in the Works Cited. Thus, the writer includes both the author’s last name and the article title in the parenthetical citation in order to lead the reader to the appropriate entry on the Works Cited page (see below). In the second example, “Stolley et al.” in the parenthetical citation gives the reader an author name followed by the abbreviation “et al.,” meaning, “and others,” for the article “MLA Formatting and Style Guide.” Both corresponding Works Cited entries are as follows:

Garcia, Elizabeth. "Herzog: a Life." Online Film Critics Corner. The Film School of New Hampshire, 2 May 2002. Web. 8 Jan. 2009.

Stolley, Karl. "MLA Formatting and Style Guide." The OWL at Purdue. 10 May 2006. Purdue University Writing Lab. 12 May 2006 .

**Basic Rules**

1. Begin your Works Cited page on a separate page at the end of your research paper. It should have the same one-inch margins and last name, page number header as the rest of your paper.
2. Label the page Works Cited (do not italicize the words Works Cited or put them in quotation marks) and center the words Works Cited at the top of the page.
3. Double space all citations, but do not skip spaces between entries.
4. Indent the second and subsequent lines of citations five spaces so that you create a hanging indent.
5. List page numbers of sources efficiently, when needed. If you refer to a journal article that appeared on pages 225 through 250, list the page numbers on your Works Cited page as 225-50.

**Additional Basic Rules New to MLA 2009**

1. Capitalize each word in the titles of articles, books, etc, but do not capitalize articles (the, an), prepositions, or conjunctions unless one is the first word of the title or subtitle: *Gone with the Wind, The Art of War, There Is Nothing Left to Lose*.
2. **New to MLA 2009**: Use italics (instead of underlining) for titles of larger works (books, magazines) and quotation marks for titles of shorter works (poems, articles)

**Work with No Known Author**

Alphabetize works with no known author by their title; use a shortened version of the title in the parenthetical citations in your paper. In this case, Boring Postcards USA has no known author:

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulations*. [...]

*Boring Postcards USA*. [...]

Burke, Kenneth. *A Rhetoric of Motives*. [...]



#### Paper Format General Guidelines

* Type your paper on a computer and print it out on standard, white 8.5 x 11-inch paper.
* Double-space the text of your paper, and use a legible font (e.g. Times New Roman). Whatever font you choose, MLA recommends that the regular and italics type styles contrast enough that they are recognizable one from another. The font size should be 12 pt.
* Leave only one space after periods or other punctuation marks (unless otherwise instructed by your instructor).
* Set the margins of your document to 1 inch on all sides.
* Indent the first line of paragraphs one half-inch from the left margin. MLA recommends that you use the Tab key as opposed to pushing the Space Bar five times.
* Create a header that numbers all pages consecutively in the upper right-hand corner, one-half inch from the top and flush with the right margin. (Note: Your instructor may ask that you omit the number on your first page. Always follow your instructor's guidelines.)
* Use italics throughout your essay for the titles of longer works and, only when absolutely necessary, providing emphasis.
* If you have any endnotes, include them on a separate page before your Works Cited page. Entitle the section Notes (centered, unformatted).

#### Formatting the First Page of Your Paper

* Do not make a title page for your paper unless specifically requested.
* In the upper left-hand corner of the first page, list your name, your instructor's name, the course, and the date. Again, be sure to use double-spaced text.
* Double space again and center the title. Do not underline, italicize, or place your title in quotation marks; write the title in Title Case (standard capitalization), not in all capital letters.
* Use quotation marks and/or italics when referring to other works in your title, just as you would in your text: Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas as Morality Play; Human Weariness in "After Apple Picking"
* Double space between the title and the first line of the text.
* Create a header in the upper right-hand corner that includes your last name, followed by a space with a page number; number all pages consecutively with Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3, 4, etc.), one-half inch from the top and flush with the right margin. (Note: Your instructor or other readers may ask that you omit last name/page number header on your first page. Always follow instructor guidelines.)

**Essay Outline Sample [Template]**

1. **Introduction**
   1. Get the reader's attention by asking a leading question; relay something enticing about the subject in a manner that commands attention. Start with a related quote, alluring description, or narration.
   2. State the thesis, the causes and effects to be discussed; comparison of subject X and subject Y; your position on the issue; your proposal if applicable; and the main points that will develop your argument.
2. **Body**
   1. First Point, Assertion, Explanation
      1. Supporting evidence (examples, facts, statistics, quoted authorities, details, reasons, examples)
      2. Supporting evidence
   2. Second explanation
      1. Support
      2. Support
   3. Third explanation
      1. Support
      2. Support
   4. Fourth explanation (continue as above with additional explanations as needed.)
      1. Support
      2. Support
   5. Your proposal (if applicable)
   6. Address opposing viewpoints
   7. **Conclusion**
   8. Show how explanations (causes) are logical reasons producing the effects discussed; review subject X and subject Y; reiterate your assertion and proposition (if applicable). Reemphasize your thesis in a fresh way, showing how your have achieved your purpose. If you intend to draw to a conclusion about one subject over the other, emphasize that point.
   9. Deal with opposing views unless done above in Section F.
   10. Appeal to the reader to see how you have come to a logical conclusion.
   11. Make a memorable final statement.

**Essay Organization**

No matter what topic you end up writing about, the organization of your essay should be the same. That’s right, the same. If you’re asked to write about whether “there’s no success like failure” or about the merits of the phrase “progress always comes at a cost,” the *structure* of your essay should be almost identical.



The first and last paragraphs are your essay’s introduction and conclusion; each of the middle three paragraphs discusses an example that supports and illustrates your argument. That’s it.

Just as important as the organization of your entire essay is the organization within each of the five paragraphs.

**The Top Bun: Introduction**

The introduction to an essay has to do three things:

* Grab the grader’s attention.
* Explain your position on the topic clearly and concisely.
* Transition the grader smoothly into your three examples.

To accomplish these three goals, you need three to four sentences in your introduction. These three to four sentences will convey your thesis statement and the overall map of your essay to the grader.

**The Thesis Statement:**

The thesis statement is the first sentence of your essay. It identifies where you stand on the topic and should pull the grader into the essay. A good thesis statement is strong, clear, and definitive. A good thesis statement for the essay topic, “Is there truly no success like failure?” is

|  |
| --- |
| Learning from the lessons taught by failure is a sure route to success. |

This thesis statement conveys the writer’s position on the topic boldly and clearly. In only a few words, it carves out the position that the essay will take on the very broad, vague topic: learning from failure yields success.

**The Essay Summary:**

After the thesis statement, the rest of the first paragraph should serve as a kind of summary of the examples you will use to support your position on the topic. Explain and describe your three examples to make it clear how they fit into your argument. It’s usually best to give each example its own sentence. Here’s an example:

|  |
| --- |
| The United States of America can be seen as a success that emerged from failure: by learning from the weaknesses of the *Articles of Confederation*, the founding fathers were able to create the *Constitution*, the document on which America is built. Google Inc., the popular Internet search engine, is another example of a success that arose from learning from failure, though in this case Google learned from the failures of its competitors. Another example that shows how success can arise from failure is the story of Rod Johnson, who started a recruiting firm that rose out of the ashes of Johnson’s personal experience of being laid off. |

Three sentences, three examples. The grader knows exactly what to expect from your essay now and is ready to dive in.

**The Meat: Three-Example Paragraphs**

Each of your three-example paragraphs should follow this basic format:

* Four to five sentences long.
* The first sentence should be the **topic sentence**, which serves as the thesis statement of the paragraph. It explains what your example is and places it within the context of your argument.
* The next three to four sentences are for **developing your example**. In these sentences you show through specific, concrete discussion of facts and situations just how your example supports your essay thesis statement.

For now we’re just going to show you one “meat” paragraph. As we continue through the chapter, you’ll see several more, some that are good, some that are bad. This one is good:

|  |
| --- |
| The United States, the first great democracy of the modern world, is also one of the best examples of a success achieved by studying and learning from earlier failures. After just five years of living under the *Articles of Confederation*, which established the United States of America as a single country for the first time, the states realized that they needed a new document and a new, more powerful government. In 1786, the Annapolis convention was convened. The result, three years later, was the *Constitution*, which created a more powerful central government while also maintaining the integrity of the states. By learning from the failure of the *Articles*, the founding fathers created the founding document of a country that has become both the most powerful country in the world and a beacon of democracy. |

The best meat paragraphs in an essay are specific. In its topic sentence, this paragraph states that the United States is one of the great examples of “a success achieved by studying and learning from failures.” It then uses the specific example of the Articles of Confederation, the Annapolis convention, and the Constitution to prove its position. It’s specific throughout and even includes a few dates.

**Transitions Between Meat Paragraphs:**

Your first meat paragraph dives right into its thesis statement, but the second and third meat paragraphs need transitions. The simplest way to build these transitions is to use words like *another* and *finally*. That means your second meat paragraph should start with a transitional phrase such as, “Another example . . .”

A slightly more sophisticated way to build transitions is to choose examples from different sources, such as from history and business. If the first paragraph is about a political instance of learning from failure and the second is from business, make that fact your transition: “As in politics, learning from failure is a means to gaining success in business as well. Take the case of. . . .”

**The Bottom Bun: Conclusion**

The conclusion of your essay should accomplish two main goals:

* Recap your argument while broadening it a bit.
* Expand your position. Look to the future.

To accomplish these two goals, your conclusion should contain three to four sentences.

**Recap Your Argument:**

The recap is a one-sentence summary of what you’ve already argued. As in the thesis statement, the recap should be straightforward, bold, and declarative. By “broadening” your argument, we mean that you should attempt to link your specific examples to wider fields, such as politics, business, and art. Here’s a recap example:

|  |
| --- |
| The examples of the *Constitution*, Rod Johnson, and Google make it clear that in the realms of politics and business, the greatest successes arise from careful considerations of the lessons of failure. |

**Expand on Your Position:**

The last two or three sentences of the essay should take the argument you just recapped and push it a little further. One of the best ways to push your argument further is to look to the future and think about what would happen if the position that you’ve taken in your essay could be applied on a broader scale. Here’s an example:

|  |
| --- |
| Failure is often seen as embarrassing, something to be denied and hidden. But as the examples of the *U.S. Constitution*, Google, and Rod Johnson prove, if an individual, organization, or even a nation is strong enough to face and study its failure, then that failure can become a powerful teacher. As the examples of history and business demonstrate, if everyone had the courage and insight to view failure as a surefire way to learn from mistakes, success would be easier to achieve. |

The bottom bun wraps up the entire essay. And there you have it! If you follow the template provided, and break down the essay into its core ingredients, your essay will be strong, clear, and easy to write.

**The Universal Essay Template**

To make sure you really get the essay organization, the following chart sums it all up. Here’s the essay outline you should use, no matter what topic you get or what position you take:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Length** | **Purpose** |
| **The Introduction** | | |
| Thesis Statement | 1 sentence | Describe your argument clearly and concisely. |
| Essay Summary | 3 sentences | Lay out the three examples you will use to support your thesis statement. |
| **Example Paragraph 1** | | |
| Topic Sentence | 1 sentence | Describe your example and fit it into the context of your overall thesis statement. |
| Example Development | 3–4 sentences | Use specific facts to show how your example supports your argument. Be as specific as possible. |
| **Example Paragraph 2** | | |
| Topic Sentence | 1 sentence | Describe your example and fit it into the context of your overall thesis. Provide a transition from the previous example paragraph. |
| Example Development | 3–4 sentences | Use specific facts to show how your example supports your argument. Be as specific as possible. |
| **Example Paragraph 3** | | |
| Topic Sentence | 1 sentence | Describe your example and fit it into the context of your overall thesis. Provide a transition from the previous paragraph. |
| Example Development | 3–4 sentences | Use specific facts to show how your example supports your argument. Be as specific as possible. |
| **The Conclusion** | | |
| Recap | 1 sentence | Summarize your argument and examples, and link the examples to broader things like politics, history, art, or business. |
| Broaden Your Argument | 2–3 sentences | Expand your position by contemplating what would happen in the world if people (or nations, or businesses) followed the argument you make in your essay. |