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Faculty of Letters and Languages
Department of English
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Introduction to MLA Style

Lesson Description

The first lecture introduces second-year students to the Modern Language Association format. Its use is common when citing references in the field of humanities. In our case, students rely on it as they write research papers and master dissertations in Anglo-American Studies (Civilization and Literature).

Learning Objectives

The main objectives of this lecture are as follows:

- 1- Students will be familiar with the logic of MLA eighth edition (8 ed.) by the end of the lecture.
- 2- Students will also recognize the nine features of MLA style when citing references.
- 3- Students will differentiate between the academic container and the digital container.

1. Definition

Modern Language Association of America Style is a type of formatting and documenting sources in academic writing. It is commonly used in humanities to cite sources when writing books, dissertations, scientific papers, essays, reviews, etc. The association was founded by Aaron Marshall Elliot in 1883. It was initially preoccupied with the study and teaching of languages and literature.

Building trust in information and ideas that the academic community shares is more important today than it has ever been. This has been the generating principle of MLA. It makes

the latter regulate language, style, document format, in-text citation and references to foster credibility of results and enrich the discussion of ideas among scholars and students. What we refer to as "MLA style" has never been a set of rules; rather, it has evolved over time to accommodate the demands of writers, students, instructors, and publishers in humanities.

2. Historical Overview

In May 1883, modern language professors in Eastern USA planned to hold a meeting to discuss the state of the study and teaching of modern languages. This marked the determination to examine the place of traditional languages in the contemporary world and anticipate the pivotal role modern languages could have in the upcoming century.

On 28 June 1883, Charles Francis Adams delivered the Harvard commencement speech. He criticized the state of college-level linguistic research praising Latin, Ancient Greek and Hebrew, stating that studying dead languages does not make the scholar or the student ready for the real world. Having said that, he regarded modern languages, more precisely English, French and Spanish, as vital tools because they are "the avenues to modern life and living thought" (qtd. in Reed et al. 14).

Adam's speech animated forty professors to hold an official conference, in which they declared themselves the Modern Language Association of America, and Marshall Elliott of Johns Hopkins was elected secretary (in 1974, this title became executive director) as Franklin Carter of Williams College was elected president. Priority in the conference was given to the following topics:

- The current status of English, German and French at American universities and colleges: (a) Their demands and needs . (B) University admission requirements.
- Modern Languages versus Ancient Languages in terms of the disciplinary value.
- The modern language teaching methods (Inductive, Deductive, and Eclectic).
- Standard raising means of modern language studies.
- College training in modern languages and its educational objectives.

In 1951, the Modern Language Association published the first MLA Style form. It was meant to teach scholars to document their writings and prepare them for publication. It contained a 31-page sample of footnotes. A revised edition was published in 1970 to add rules in an expanded 48 pages, and by 1977, the first edition of 136 pages of the MLA Handbook was published to meet the needs of scholars and students in research and academic writing. More editions were released with the aim of providing a more expanded version that contained more rules and details for the academic community. In 2009, the seventh edition continued to give more information on the templates used for works cited page and in-text citations. In 2016 the eighth edition was published to mark a paradigm shift in documenting sources to accommodate the change that took place in academic publications and the world in general, moving from the real, the physical space to the virtual digital one. The template-based approach was replaced by a more flexible system that considers the mobility of texts and their location in different digital containers. In April 2021, the ninth edition of MLA style was released to focus on source evaluation and stress the importance of connecting information and digital literacy. This course focuses more on the eighth edition of MLA style because it was the edition that introduced this new paradigm in source documentation.

3. The Logic of MLA (8th Edition) Style:

As stated in the overview of MLA eighth edition, nowadays, the digital world makes academia more mobile and undermined. Many forms of communication and new platforms continue to appear on daily bases. Additionally, articles and other academic papers merge into different digital media and platforms. For instance, today's article published in a given print journal may be found and read online in JSTOR or another platform. For this reason, a system of documenting sources that should pay attention to the idea of physical as much as digital containers is highly needed. The MLA 8th edition tends to focus on specific principles rather than a detailed list of rules and formats. It provides scholars and students in humanities with common sense guidelines that help when conducting research and provides the target audience

with valuable, precise information about the used sources. So, based on the overview of MLA eighth edition, three principles should be taken into account:

- The core features of documentation: academic writers should cite simple common traits shared by most works. Instead of works-cited lists that follow perspective formats, writers focus on the common aspects of documentation in all sources (see the core features of documentation).
- There is more than one correct way to document a source: it depends on the target audience. For instance, advanced scholars may need more details about the used sources than students. Monographs are cited differently compared to general books.
- Making documentation useful and clear to readers: Achieving the goals of documentation means providing sufficient information in a consistent, precise form.

4. The Core Features of Documentation:

Academic writers are required to consider the core elements of the source and list them carefully. With a set of few rules and more about understanding the basic principles behind documentation, scholars and students can generate useful documentation of any academic work in a specific publication format that is clear for the target audience. Hence, the MLA 8th edition is a flexible process-based style that focuses on **the core features** that most sources share or have. This is what makes these guidelines universal, efficient and easy. We have ten features that are located in **three containers**: **Lead information** (Author and Title of Source), **Academic Container** (Title of container, Other contributors, Version, Number, Publisher, Publication Date, and Location), and **Digital Container** (Digital location: Website, DOI etc.) We call the illustration below **a chart of identification**. It shows the core features that each source contains.

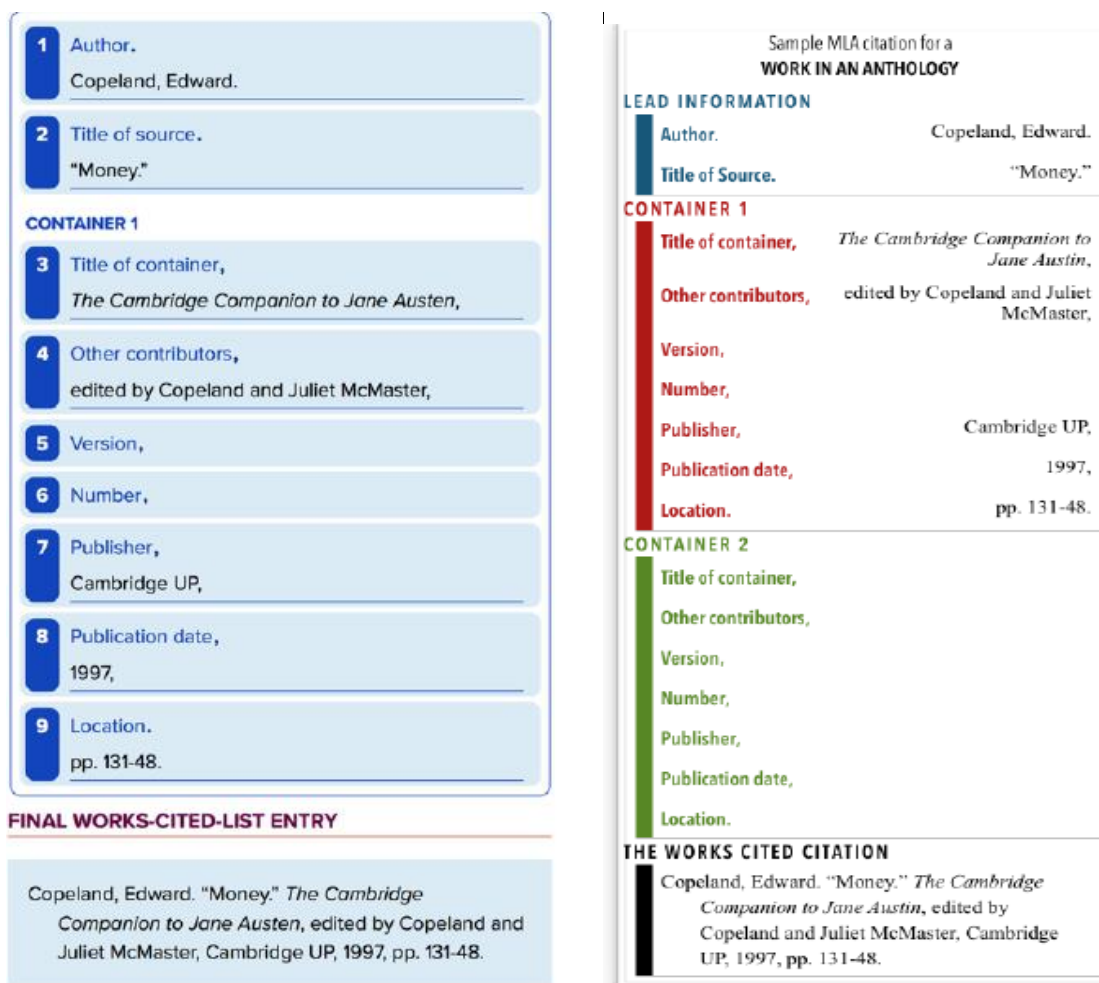


Fig. 1. Chart of Identification

Source: MLA, 8th Edition: An Introduction & Overview, 2016, pp. 15,16.

5. Key Points to Retain:

- Consider what your readers need to know if they wish to find your source, as the eighth edition stresses the writer's ability to make references based on the audience's expectations.
- Think of MLA-style principles as **flexible guidelines** rather than rules.
- Your goal is to enlighten, convince, or otherwise engage with your audience; flawless writing and reliable documentation allow readers to follow your ideas and arguments easily.
- The appearance of your in-text citations should be consistent throughout your paper (essay, presentation review, etc.). The rules for in-text citations haven't changed much between the seventh and eighth editions.
- MLA 8th edition guidelines are founded on a simple theory. Once you understand the fundamentals of style and citation, you can use that knowledge to create valuable documentation for any form of publication in any field.

References

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