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Can a Classic Improve Its Style

by Phillip Powell (Bibliographic Instruction Coordinator, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC) <powellp@cofc.edu>

A anyone who staffs the reference desk in an academic library, who is in regular consultation with freshman English students, is very aware of the importance of the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers published by the Modern Language Association. In reference parlance, it is most often called either the MLA Handbook or just the MLA. As one of those reference librarians, I had always had a vague understanding that the MLA covered a wide range of topics relating to research. Yet, my experience has always centered upon Chapter 4 or Chapter 5 (depending on the edition). Being able to wade through this thick chapter, through all the options for documenting books and articles in periodicals, has always been deemed a major accomplishment. And the day when the discovery was made how to cite a reprint, it was almost cause to proclaim a national holiday! Suddenly, this librarian finally knew how to properly cite the likes of excerpts from all the Gale literary criticism series.

The MLA has been around since the first edition appeared in 1977. It is the citation standard primarily for the disciplines within the Humanities. Each new edition has addressed changes in citation and research approaches plus recognizing and coping with technology as information delivery has changed. It must be said, this has occurred with varying degrees of success. This time, with the 6th edition, MLA has an outstanding work.

A more thorough examination of the work shows what a complete package of truly useful information this edition of the MLA Handbook can be for the student writer. Author Joseph Gihardtz guides the reader, chapter-by-chapter, through the research and writing process. The reader is given a library research course in microcosm within Chapters 1 and 2. Topic selection, researching information (using the library), and evaluating that information are all included in the first chapter. Additionally, noting, outlining, and the writing of preliminary drafts are addressed. Such topics are essential for us as librarians. Now only do we spend considerable time discussing citation style with students, we also work on basic research skills that many of them lack. Librarians at the College of Charleston have adopted this edition of the MLA as a text for the credit course offered because of the excellent coverage of research skills. But it’s Chapter 1, the most recent edition, that addresses the inundation of electronic sources in library research. Even ten years ago, only those whose thinking was furthest outside the box could have predicted how completely technology has consumed the research process.

The last edition spoke about the online catalog and CD-ROM databases. This new edition recognizes the World Wide Web as the primary means of conveyance for both subscription databases and scholarly Web-based databases. Recognized, too, is the inherent need to determine which sites are worthy of one’s perusal and study since the Internet is not a footnoted medium. This concept will be discussed further in the next section.

Oscar Wilde to James McNell Whistler: “I wish I’d said that, Jimmy.” Whistler: “Don’t worry, Oscar, you will.” (qtd. in Jeffers 54)

Preventing plagiarism—or perhaps more positively stated, proper citation—is the primary purpose for any style manual. Journalists, historians, noted (and sometimes revered) personalities, and students have all been accused of plagiarism. Misrepresentation of both facts and sources is cause for scandal. A cursory search of Jayson Blair illustrates how one person’s actions caused shock waves among the most eminent of institutions, the New York Times. Although plagiarism is not a new problem, it is the World Wide Web and all its options that have blurred the lines and made the concept of plagiarism seemingly less burdensome both intellectually and ethically. Librarians and professors in academic find students capriciously cutting and pasting scholarly articles into their papers without giving proper credit. Term papers are available for a Visa number as easily as one can type www.google.com. Finally, students will take whatever information they find from a Webpage, take it at face value without verification, and apply it to their research without proper citation, as if it is their own.

The other day, I turned around from my desk here to search out various editions of the MLA Handbook on the shelf. To my astonishment, not only do I have the 6th and 5th editions, but I own every other edition back to the 2nd, published in 1984. It gives me the opportunity to see how MLA’s approach to philosophy toward plagiarism has evolved over the last 20 years.

Actually, not much changed over the course of several editions when only print sources were available. Not until the 5th edition did MLA begin to address the existence of the Internet in the context of plagiarism issues. That consisted of a single paragraph at the end of the section in Chapter 1 concerning plagiarism. MLA has caught up in the four years between editions. This most recent edition places much more emphasis on the whole concept by including an entire chapter on plagiarism. Although there are many similarities with past editions, the new chapter explains plagiarism and its consequences in more depth. The section titled “Informa-

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ily not definitive and will doubtless change [emphasis added] as technology, scholarly uses of electronic materials, and electronic publication practices evolve. (208)

Although the more cynical reader might think MLA is throwing in the proverbial towel, this reviewer believes MLA has developed a philosophy about citing Internet sources, which allows guidelines, but gives the researcher latitude to cite a source as information is given. Considering the nature of the Internet, the admission they cannot pose strict rules is actually gratifying. It may make users uncomfortable, especially those who need a visible framework, but it is appreciated MLA is willing to work with technological changes rather than stonewall them. Yet, in the very nature of bibliographic citation, the user works with the information that is given. It just seems Internet sites are much more erratic in providing the necessary information for a complete citation.

Examination of Chapter 5, Section 9, where the examples of electronic citation are compiled, contains more examples of electronic possibilities than this reviewer could have imagined. The examples are in keeping with MLA's decision to adhere closely to citing scholarly sources. Yet, at least for the undergraduate student, most of these examples will be superfluous. That is the beauty of a good thorough citation guide. The user is given examples of as many possibilities conceivable and even though there might not be the exact example, the skilled user can piece together an acceptable citation.

Does this reviewer agree with all the recommendations MLA makes for electronic citation? No. Not really. The quibbles are small. They may be more just a matter of preference than anything. The primary one deals with the use of the URL, following the citation for a library subscription service. The use of it is felt to be unnecessary by the reviewer. Experience shows that most, if not all students, access these services through links in a library homepage. Using the URL—even from a computer whose ISP is recognized by the service as a subscriber—often gets the searcher to the company's main page and no further. Finally, URLs can be inconsistent. But such an adjustment can be made without any difficulty. As sources on the Internet are refined—we can only hope—the uniformity and consistency for citing electronic sources will also be refined.

Admittedly, this reviewer has had a love-hate relationship with the MLA Handbook over the years. It has been necessary to use it as both a librarian and as an instructor, but a level of satisfaction and trust—for lack of a better word—was never quite achieved. With the introduction of the 6th edition, Gibaldi and MLA have reached a balance acknowledging research and citation as it exists presently, but leaves the door open for adapting to the inevitable changes technology brings. My ho-hum attitude is gone. This is the standard for all future editions.

References

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