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Can a Classic Improve Its Style

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Can a Classic Improve Its Style

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

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 one 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 Gibaldi** 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, note taking, outlining, and the writing of preliminary drafts are addressed. Such topics are essential for us as librarians. Not 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 foolproof medium. This concept will be discussed further in the next section.

Oscar Wilde to James McNeill 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) personages, 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 academe 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 and philosophy toward plagiarism have 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 "In-

formation Sharing Today" (2.3) broaches the easy exchange of information on the World Wide Web. Emphasis is placed on how uninitiated students must learn to distinguish between their own ideas and ideas that are borrowed. This is especially important with the nearly unrestricted information available on the WWW.

Creating a complete chapter devoted to plagiarism is definitely a positive editorial decision. After letting technology run past them, the writers of the most recent *MLA Handbook* have wisely grasped the importance of the issue beyond the traditional scholarly stance taken in the past.

Oscar Wilde again: "In all unimportant matters, style, not sincerity, is the essential. In all important matters, style, not sincerity, is the essential." (Batchelor 96)

Certainly not as **Wilde** meant it, it is still style, or documentation, which keeps both librarians and students coming back to the *MLA Handbook*. We are drawn to it as a moth to an open flame. [Perhaps the reviewer is reading too much of our noted aesthete.] This edition has vastly improved the manner of presentation for citing both print and electronic materials. Up until this edition, *MLA* listed what elements, i.e., author, title, publisher, volume number, were included in a type of citation and then demonstrated the various ways these elements could be properly arranged. The latest edition, though, takes an additional step, which is helpful to the more visual learner. Throughout the chapter, there are illustrations of the ways title pages are arranged and where the bibliographical elements are located. In the best *MLA* way, each illustration shows a different bibliographic situation that a user might face. That is, is it a single author? An edited volume? A corporate author? These same types of examples exist for citing periodicals also. To us jaded librarians, this may appear to be simplification, but experience at the reference desk has shown that this can be a real conundrum for the average English 101 student.

The most problematic issue, though, is citing electronic sources. The approach *MLA* takes has matured and strengthened since the last edition. It was alluded to earlier that the Internet is a muddle of sources. It is difficult to determine what is worthwhile and what is not. A single paragraph in Chapter 5 places into very clear focus *MLA's* intentions relating to citing Internet sources.

These recommendations are aimed...at students who use ideas and facts from electronic sources to complement those derived from traditional print sources. Moreover, since this section cannot possibly cover all materials available in electronic form, its emphasis, like that of the rest of this handbook, is on refereed, authoritative sources as well as on historical texts. This edition's recommendations on citing electronic works are necessar-

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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.

Admitted, 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.

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