

Writing Standards

MLA Standards/Presentation Format:

1. Always double-space your papers.
2. Papers must be typed in a standard 12-pt. font on 8½x11-in. paper with one-inch margins.
3. Do not include a cover page or folder with your essay (unless told otherwise).
4. Be sure to use a bibliography of "Works Cited" or "Works Consulted" (indicates that more sources were used than those cited in the paper) and MLA documentation of any quotations, paraphrases, or ideas borrowed from other sources (including *SparkNotes*). <Not adequately documenting your use of others' work will lead to failure>.

Getting Started:

1. Begin writing early--allow your rough draft to sit a few days before you make revisions.
2. Remember your purpose when writing about literature--to give readers some insights that might not occur to them on a first reading.
3. Read and reread the literature with your topic in mind; make a list of key passages/quotations to discuss and important points to make.
4. Decide what the central idea of your paper will be; answer the question, "What do I have to prove?". This idea will be connection to the prompt or topic your teacher may have given to you.

Generating a Thesis Statement:

1. Do not confuse a thesis with a statement of topic. It should not be self-evident (requiring no proof or explanation). It should not just state the obvious or the excessively general.
2. Your goal is to create a clear, concise thesis statement that addresses all of the questions posed in the prompt and provides a preview of your main points (topic + argument).
3. Your thesis should be contestable or debatable.
4. Your thesis statement can consist of more than one sentence.
5. A good thesis will answer the "So What?" question--it should tell the readers why they should care about what you have to say (why the subject is significant or interesting). A good thesis is also very specific about the insights that you will communicate.

- **Examples of a poor thesis:**

- "Shakespeare uses many images of darkness and light in *Macbeth*." (too vague)
- "Since the beginning of time, poets have used imagery to express their feelings. The English poet William Shakespeare is one of the great masters of dramatic imagery. In *Macbeth*..." (too sweeping)

- **Examples of a stronger thesis:**

- "Shakespeare uses images of darkness and light in *Macbeth* not only to establish the time and mood of the scenes, but also to suggest the way that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth become identified with evil."
- "In the troubled world of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, much of the action takes place either in "fog and filthy air" or at night. Where the modern theater would use lighting to establish the time and mood of scenes, Shakespeare uses an extensive pattern of light and dark imagery. These images do more than set the scene and tell the time; they also create the moral atmosphere of the play, suggesting a world in which Macbeth and Lady Macbeth become increasingly identified with evil while futilely trying to hide the nature of their deeds from their conscience and from others." (not only promises to talk about imagery, but also indicates the major points that will be made)

6. Always place your thesis statement at the end of your introduction paragraph.
7. Take your time when generating the thesis. A good thesis may take hours to develop.

Writing the Paper:

1. NO *flowery* introductions!
2. Include title(s), author(s), and other relevant information about the work(s) in the introductory paragraph.
3. All *body paragraphs* should begin with a clear and assertive topic sentence that develops some aspect of the thesis. Your topic sentences (paragraph points) should make a contestable claim about the scene, passage, or work you are discussing. They should also preview the key characters, concepts, etc. that will be discussed in that paragraph.
4. Make sure each paragraph of the paper develops some aspect of the thesis. Your goal is to progressively clarify and illustrate your main points as the discussion proceeds. Make sure the "So what?" is addressed and answered with each point.

5. Check for coherence by reading the first sentence or two of each paragraph to see if they reveal a logical development of your argument. One way to ensure that this happens is to *repeat the key words* of your point several times during the analysis in the body.
6. DO NOT allow plot summary or paraphrase to substitute for analysis. Concentrate on significance (e.g. how speeches and actions shape our understanding of events, characters, etc.; how word choice, imagery, etc. communicate more powerfully than statements alone). Integrate “analytical buzz words” in your writing (e.g. shows, proves, indicates, highlights, suggests, reveals, displays, demonstrates, establishes, represents, implies, etc.).
7. The body paragraphs should have textual evidence (quotes) to support/illustrate your claims. They should also contain explanations of how the text makes connections between the ideas in your interpretation.
8. End each body paragraph with a summation sentence that ties back to the thesis/“So What?”; say something greater about your topic here, but do not introduce your next point.
9. Use the conclusion to take your main argument one step further or to draw out the significance of your topic. Conclusions can have new material; they should not be needless repetitions of your previous points.

Textual Evidence Tips:

1. Select the best concrete evidence to support your claims. Use quotes that emphasize your analysis rather than plot. *Do not use quotes to support the obvious.*
2. Provide sufficient textual evidence for each point.
3. Check to see that you are constantly relating the quotations to your thesis.
4. Avoid using longer quotes.
5. Work short quotations (words/phrases) into your sentences to enrich the reader’s awareness of significant phrases in the text. This is frequently called integrating quotations.
6. Use correct MLA documentation when citing quotes: “This is my quote” (29). Always make clear which text is being referenced.
7. Use single quotation marks for quoted material inside double quotation marks: “Say ‘I love you’ one more time.”
8. All quotations should correspond exactly to the original source in spelling, capitalization, and italicization. Any changes you make to the original text or comments/explanations you add should be placed in square brackets. Use an ellipsis to edit text that is superfluous or unnecessary in proving your point. DO NOT edit information that could change a reading of the text. Look at an example from the story “The Necklace” by Guy de Maupassant:

Actual sentence in text:

"She danced joyfully, passionately, intoxicated with pleasure, thinking of nothing but the moment, in the triumph of her beauty, in the glory of her success, on cloud nine with happiness made up of all the admiration, of all the aroused desire, of this victory so complete and so sweet to the heart of any woman."

- If using this quote without previously mentioning the character, substitute in brackets the character's name for the pronoun:
 - "[Mrs. Loisel] danced joyfully, passionately..."
 - If the point you are trying to make can be supported with a shortened version of the quote (without altering its meaning), use an ellipsis:
 - "She danced joyfully, passionately...thinking of nothing but the moment...on cloud nine with happiness made up of all the admiration...of this victory so complete and so sweet to the heart of any woman."
9. Be sure to preserve the punctuation, capitalization, and line arrangement of verse.
10. Supply **line** numbers (for poetry or drama) or **page** numbers (for fiction or prose) with all quotations. Act, scene, and line numbers for plays can be given in compressed form (V.ii.23-5 -or- 5.2.23-5). Give only the information that you have not already supplied in your writing; if you have said in your words/text that you are discussing Act 5, Scene 2, then you only need to put (lines 23-5) after the quotation.
- In citing classic verse plays/poems, cite by division (act, scene, canto, book, part) and line(s); omit page numbers. Use a period to separate the different numbers.
 - For example, when citing line 19 from book IX of *The Iliad*, use this reference: (IX.19).
 - When citing only line numbers, use "line" or "lines" initially, then just give the numbers alone (in cases where abbreviations "1." and "11." can be confused with numerals).
11. Long quotes (more than three lines of verse and five or more lines of prose) should generally be introduced by a colon, should begin a new line, and should be indented so they are set off from the rest of the paragraph. These quotes should be typed double-spaced, like the rest of the essay. Also, quotations arranged in this way do not need to have quotation marks around them.
- **Important MLA format exception:** When setting quotations off from the rest of your text in this way, the punctuation stays with the original material you are quoting (it does not follow

the parenthetical reference at the end of the sentence as it typically would). See the examples that follow.

- When quoting dialogue between two or more characters, set the quotes off from the rest of your writing. Type the character's name in all capital letters, follow it with a period, and start the quotation. Indent the rest of the lines in that character's speech three spaces. When the next character speaks, start a new line, indented one inch from the left margin. Continue the pattern for the entire quotation.

➤ Even though John Proctor had an affair with Abigail, he still loves his wife very much and wants to make it up to her:

PROCTOR. If the crop is good I'll buy George
Jacob's heifer. How would that please you?

ELIZABETH. Aye, it would.

PROCTOR (*with a grin*). I mean to please you,
Elizabeth. (192)

- When a verse quotation begins in the middle of a line, position the partial line where it is in the original text.

➤ A short time later Lear loses the final symbol of his former power, the soldiers who make up his train:

GONERIL. Hear me, my lord.

What need you five-and-twenty, ten or five,
To follow in a house were twice so many
Have a command to tend you?

REGAN. What need one?

LEAR. O, reason not the need! (2.4.254-58)

12. Shorter quotes should be placed in quotation marks within your text.

- If you quote parts of two lines of poetry, indicate the line break by space/slash/space:
 - The Green Knight reassures Sir Gawain that his fault is forgiven: “I hold you polished as a pearl, as pure and as bright / As you had lived free of fault since first you were born” (lines 2393-4).
- Quotations are introduced by a colon if they illustrate the statement made in your sentence (see above example).
- Quotations are introduced by either a comma or no punctuation if they are part of your sentence:
 - “I hold you polished as a pearl,” the Green Knight tells Sir Gawain.
 - The Green Knight calls Sir Gawain “polished as a pearl” because he considers him guiltless.

13. The following example from an essay on *Macbeth* illustrates proper citation of quotes/documentation:

The idea that Macbeth is an evil creature who stalks his prey in the dark is reinforced by his invocation to the night in Act 3, Scene 2. Like Lady Macbeth's invocation to “thick night” in Act 1, Scene 5, his speech is an attempt to strengthen his resolve and to drive away fear. By asking night to “scarf up the eye of pitiful day” (line 47), Macbeth tries to repress his conscience, but he will learn all too painfully that “that great bond / That keeps (him) pale” (ll. 49-50) is also the sense of moral limits that ties him to other people. Equally ominous is his statement that:

Light thickens, and the crow

Makes wing to the rooky wood.

Good things of day begin to droop and drowse

While night's black agents to their prey do rowse. (3.2.46-

Literally, "night's black agents" refers to the animals and birds of prey who hunt in the "rooky wood" at night, but metaphorically it suggests that Macbeth has become a less-than-human agent of evil.

Always Proofread Your Work:

1. Type from a rough draft (do not hand in unless requested).
2. Title your paper. Your title should be original, interesting, and present the focus of your paper (topic + argument).
3. Avoid pronouns, especially "you" and "it."
4. Avoid using "this" as a subject; always follow "this" with a noun (e.g. This reaction shows that she cares about him).
5. Use the present (stands) or present perfect (has stood) tense when discussing the actions of characters in literature.
*Exception: Use past tense when referring to actions that occurred outside of the story itself (e.g. John Proctor *had* an affair with Abigail Williams. <We find this information out during the play, but it happened in the past.> -BUT- John Proctor *tears* up his confession and *dies* to save his name. <Both actions take place during the final act of the play.>).
6. Underline or italicize titles of books, plays, magazines, newspapers, anthologies, films, and long poems that have been published individually. Use quotation marks for poems, songs, magazine and newspaper articles, short stories, essays and titles of chapters of books.
7. Commas and periods always go inside quotation marks (Note: parenthetical references come between quotation marks and final punctuation). Semicolons, colons, question marks, and exclamation points go outside quotation marks unless they are part of the original material).
8. Don't overuse "this," "very," "really," "a lot," or "interesting."
9. Eliminate fragments and run-on sentences.
10. Avoid comma splices by making the sentence into two sentences, adding a semi-colon, or using a comma and a conjunction.
11. Remember the difference between "its" and "it's":
Its=possession; It's=it is.
12. Know the difference between "than" and "then":
Than=a comparison; Then=a time.
Know the difference between there, their, and they're.
There = location, Their = Possession, They're = Contraction.
13. The plurals of nouns that end in -s or -es take no apostrophes.

14. Possessives: add 's to singular nouns or plural nouns ending in -en (boy's, man's, women's); add only an apostrophe to plurals that end in -s or -ies (ladies' room, boys' games); usage differs on proper nouns ending in -es or -us (Xerxes' army, Erasmus's satire); pronouns never use apostrophes (hers, theirs, its).
15. Sentence Variety/ Sentence Patterns: Use a variety of sentence patterns throughout your writing to keep the reader interested and to help maintain unity or focus.
 - Simple Sentence: John Proctor is married to Elizabeth Proctor.
 - Compound Sentence: John Proctor remains married, and Elizabeth Proctor holds his affair against him at the beginning of the play.
 - Complex Sentence: After John confesses his adulterous affair, Elizabeth forgives him.
 - Compound/Complex Sentence: Near the end of the play, John upholds his beliefs, and Elizabeth shows her loyalty to her husband.
16. Avoid ending a sentence with a preposition. Correct grammar tells us that a preposition needs an object; therefore ending a sentence with a preposition would not work. Common prepositions misused to end a sentence include - of, with, about.
17. Avoid pretentious writing (stringing words together to make your paper sound intelligent).
18. Do not use any sentences from SparkNotes, Cliff's Notes or similar "study aids."
19. Search Engines such as Google.com, Angelfire.com, About.com should not be cited as your source. These websites take you to the specific webpage that you may use as a source.
20. Make use of the Academic Vocabulary that you have been studying. These are the words posted around school, emphasized by your teachers and learned by you.

Helpful Websites:

- <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>
 - o This website is helpful in MLA Style as well as the writing process as a whole. More examples can be found here.
- <http://www.libs.uga.edu/ref/mlastyle.html>
 - o This website shows examples of Works Cited as well as in-text documentation for various types of sources.
- <http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/>
 - o This website has multiple tabs to explore related to academic or writing for college.

- <http://www.cws.illinois.edu/workshop/writers/>
 - This website has several links to the writing process as well as to usage and grammar.
- The librarian in the LRC has an excellent guide for assessing to see if the website you want to use is credible and up to date. These are sitting next to the copy machine.

Websites to Avoid:

- Any website that promises to give you a completed, written assignment. Teachers and Turnitin.com recognize these immediately. Examples include, but are not limited to 123helpme.com, freessays.com, sparknotes.com, pinkmonkey.com, etc.
- <http://Wikipedia.org>
 - This website is unreliable and can be changed or added to by anyone with access to the web. A post may start out as fact but become distorted, fictionalized by another, unrelated post.

Works Consulted

- "The Center for Writing Studies" *University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign*. 28 Dec. 2009. University of Illinois Board of Trustees. 2008
<<http://www.english.uiuc.edu>>.
- Gibaldi, Joseph. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 6th ed. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2003.
- Roberts, Edgar V. *Writing About Literature*. 9th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999.