

21W.730 Consumer Culture: MLA Style for Essays III and IV

I. Using sources in humanities papers: rationale

We will use MLA style for citing sources in Essays III and IV. The MLA style of citation, used for language, literature, and other humanities papers, provides a format for citing sources in the text and in a Works Cited page at the end of your paper.

As important as knowing how to use this format is understanding the rationale behind MLA style: while it aims to keep citations as unobtrusive as possible, it does *not* aim to keep sources “hidden.” Thus:

Americans have gotten into the habit of overspending (Schor 3).

is correct in terms of citation method, but **it is not the way you want to cite, at least until you have introduced Schor fully and cited her several times**. Rather,

According to Juliet Schor, Americans have gotten into the habit of overspending (3). In *The Overspent American*, Schor argues . . .

would be a good way to begin a discussion that incorporates Schor’s ideas.

In other words, in MLA style we want writers to be present in essays not just as page numbers, but as thinkers.

One reason for this is that much of what you’re working with in essays like our Essays III and IV is other writers’ ideas and interpretations. For example, Phyllis Rose does not exactly define spirituality; but in the way she develops her essay about shopping as a spiritual adventure, she makes some implicit claims about it. If you work with Rose’s ideas, you need to show us your interpretation of Rose’s ideas about spirituality—and **we readers need to be able to distinguish between your ideas and Rose’s—between your ideas and those of any source in your paper**.

Further, it is often the case that you will be incorporating ideas from more than one writer in a given paragraph. It does not suffice to simply list sources at the end of the paragraph (Rushkoff 6; Schor 5)—you must cite each time you use a quote or paraphrase an idea, so that we know which idea is attributed to which writer—and, again, so that we can distinguish their ideas from yours.

The same is true for most of the sources you will be drawing on in your research essay: little of what you use will be pure data, as it would be in a lab report. Rather, the information you find is embedded in a discussion by a writer who has a particular area of expertise, particular interests and biases; or it is sponsored by a corporation, foundation, institute, governmental agency, publication or other organization that has its own interests and point of view. It is likewise important to understand, to the extent that you can, the contexts in which the writers of your source material are operating. For instance, to say that someone is a “Democratic Senator” might not mean the same thing in 1969 as in 1999 in terms of expected stances on certain issues.

(more)

II. Techniques for incorporating research language into your paper

Why do we use sources' language in our papers? We want to provide evidence to support the argument we are making. However, we don't just want sources to echo us and vice versa—

Consumers are spending too much. As Juliet Schor says, consumers are "overspent."

—is a weak use of source material. We want sources to extend our comments, deepen them, provide specificity. Sometimes we want to put sources in conversation with each other, either to reinforce a point or to point up conflict among sources.

Sometimes our purposes are best served with a quotation that is several lines long—for example, when the information is densely packed or it takes several sentences for the source's point to become clear. However, **lengthy quotes should be kept to a minimum**; when they dominate a paper, it gives the appearance that you aren't making your own argument but just stringing together other people's ideas.

Often we want to quote a sentence or so, because we want our readers to hear something in a source's own voice. Other times it is more efficient to paraphrase information—we might be able to summarize pertinent points from 2 or more paragraphs of source material in one succinct paragraph of our own or even a few sentences. **A good way to bring sources' voices into a paper without slowing the pace is to insert a quoted a word or phrase within our own language—i.e., we don't always need to quote whole sentences.**

When we quote sources, we need to keep a few things in mind:

- 1) We need to use language that lets the reader know that we aren't taking sources at face value: Schor argues, claims, asserts, considers; she assumes, recognizes, agrees, disagrees; or she explains, implies, wonders, wishes. Even words like "says," "states," "observes" and "remarks" let us know you aren't simply taking an author's words as fact, but are aware that they are her or his belief.
- 2) When we quote a sentence or more, we generally need to reflect on the quote, to let readers know why we are bringing the quote to their attention: we don't just drop the quotes onto the page like so many raisins on top of a bun.
- 3) We need to integrate quotes into our own sentences smoothly; the quoted material combined with our own language must form a syntactically correct whole. Sometimes we need to delete a word or couple of words, change a verb tense, or add explanatory language. To do this we use ellipsis and brackets. Thus if the logic of our sentence requires "forming" while our source's language has "form," we may write "form[ing]"; or if our quote refers to "him," "it" or "they," we may need to tell readers what these words refer to: "they [Americans]" and so on.
- 4) Whether we quote or paraphrase, we must always cite sources.

III. Mechanics of citation

Consult a style guide that gives you MLA style for citing within your text and in a Works Cited page. Pay particular attention to punctuation surrounding in-text citation; how to set off quotes 4 lines or longer; and how to list various types of sources, including articles in anthologies and web sources. Note: Works Cited contains only sources referred to in your paper. It is not annotated.