The **mla** class

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**Abstract**

In the United States, secondary and undergraduate students are generally expected to adhere to the format prescribed by the Modern Language Association (MLA) for typewritten essays, research papers and writings. Sadly, the tool of choice is usually Microsoft Word, even amongst those fluent with \TeX. Though there are some templates and tools to aid in writing in the MLA format using \LaTeX, none fully met the expectations of the author. So voilà, there now exists an **mla.cls** proper: a simple, straightforward class for composing papers almost perfectly adherent to the MLA style guide\(^1\).

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1 Initial code

The mla class uses the article class as its base. Thanks to this, macros such as \textit or \textsuperscript work as expected and won’t have to be re-defined.

\LoadClass[letterpaper,12pt]{article}

The Handbook requires use of the day month year date format, not \TeX’s standard month day, year. The macro \mladate will format \today accordingly to be used as the default value for \date (see section 5.1).

\newcommand{\mladate}{%\the\day\ifcase\the\month%\or January%\or February%\or March%\or April%\or May%\or June%\or July%\or August%\or September%}
The following are true/false switches to toggle certain features.

\MLA@seven
\MLA@eight
\MLA@eightalt
\MLA@figures
\MLA@notes
\MLA@microtype
\MLA@paperheader
\MLA@pageheader
\MLA@plainheadings
\MLA@fullpage

2 Options

Some teachers and professors might still require using the seventh edition of the *Handbook*, while others will likely use the eighth edition. Which edition to implement can be explicitly specified with the \texttt{mla7} and \texttt{mla8} class options. The only difference this makes within the \texttt{mla} class itself is the citation format used by \texttt{biblatex}.

\begin{verbatim}
\DeclareOption{mla7}{\MLA@seventrue\MLA@eightfalse\MLA@eightaltfalse}
\DeclareOption{mla8}{\MLA@sevenfalse\MLA@eighttrue\MLA@eightaltfalse}
\end{verbatim}

Some versions of \texttt{biblatex-mla} might not recognize the \texttt{style=mla-new} option for the eighth edition. In this case, one can specify \texttt{mla8alt} to the \texttt{mla} class.

\begin{verbatim}
\DeclareOption{mla8alt}{\MLA@sevenfalse\MLA@eightfalse\MLA@eightalttrue}
\end{verbatim}

For those who do not plan on using figures and/or footnotes, some time (and dependency disk space) might be saved by using the \texttt{nofigures} and/or \texttt{nonotes} options, as they are enabled by default.

\begin{verbatim}
\DeclareOption{nofigures}{\MLA@figuresfalse}
\DeclareOption{nonotes}{\MLA@notesfalse}
\end{verbatim}

The \texttt{microtype} package can be optionally included with the \texttt{microtype} option to offset the pain of using the Times typeface.

\begin{verbatim}
\DeclareOption{microtype}{\MLA@microtypetrue}
\end{verbatim}

For rare cases in which the paper and page headers are omitted or must be custom, the options \texttt{nopaperheader} and \texttt{nopageheader} may be used respectively, or \texttt{noheaders} to omit both.

\begin{verbatim}
\DeclareOption{nopaperheader}{\MLA@paperheaderfalse}
\end{verbatim}
For professors and/or writers who desire to format the section headings manually and individually (and forego `\titleformat{}`, the `plainheadings` option may be used.

Another edge case is in which a professor may require strict 24-line papers, i.e. explicitly allowing orphans and widows, enabled using the `fullpage` option\(^1\).

2.1 Processing

A friendly warning will be provided when an unknown option is provided.

By default, the eighth edition of the *Handbook* is used. To future-proof your documents for upcoming editions, however, it may be wise to explicitly specify `mla8`.

3 Loading packages

The `mla` class requires the following packages\(^2\):

---
\(^1\)In versions of `mlacls` prior to v0.9, disallowing widows and orphans was default behavior.
\(^2\)All of the required packages are available for download on the Comprehensive \TeX\ Archive Network (CTAN) if unavailable on your system: [https://www.ctan.org/](https://www.ctan.org/).
And finally, \biblatex. The \texttt{mla} class options dictate what options are passed to \biblatex, hence the if-then clauses.

\begin{verbatim}
\ifMLA@seven
  \RequirePackage[style=mla,noremoteinfo=false,showmedium=true,
  backend=biber]{biblatex}
\fi
\ifMLA@eight
  \RequirePackage[style=mla-new,noremoteinfo=false,
  showmedium=false,backend=biber]{biblatex}
\fi
\ifMLA@eightalt
  \RequirePackage[style=mla,noremoteinfo=false,
  showmedium=false,backend=biber]{biblatex}
\fi
\end{verbatim}

The \texttt{caption}, \texttt{float} and \texttt{graphicx} packages are loaded by default, but can be disabled using the \texttt{nofigures} option.

\begin{verbatim}
\ifMLA@figures
  \RequirePackage{caption}
  \RequirePackage{float}
  \RequirePackage{graphicx}
\fi
\end{verbatim}

Likewise, the \texttt{enotez} package can be disabled with \texttt{nonotes}.

\begin{verbatim}
\ifMLA@notes
  \RequirePackage{enotez}
\fi
\end{verbatim}

The \texttt{microtype} package is loaded if the \texttt{microtype} option is specified.

\begin{verbatim}
\ifMLA@microtype
  \RequirePackage{microtype}
\fi
\end{verbatim}

For some reason, common practice is to load \texttt{hyperref} last of all packages.

\begin{verbatim}
\RequirePackage{hyperref}
\hypersetup{hidelinks,pdfusetitle}
\end{verbatim}

4 Document layout

4.1 Font

The \texttt{newtxtex} package was already loaded in section 3, and the font was set to 12pt when loading the \texttt{article} class in section 1. This should be metric-compatible with the infamous Times New Roman, the \textit{de facto} standard of the MLA format\footnote{According to the popular, oft-referenced Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL): https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/mla_general_format.html.}. 

4.1.1 Microtype

The microtype package (if loaded as in section 3) will marginally offset the burden of using Times by correcting its ugly kerning and tracking. The vague `activate=false` below simply disables protrusion, maintaining original line and page breaks.

\ifMLA@microtype
\microtypesetup{activate=false}
\fi

4.2 Line breaking and spacing

The Handbook prescribes exact double-spacing, the definition of which varies between typesetters. With these parameters exact, \LaTeX{} produces 23 lines of text whereas the “industry standard” Microsoft Word\(^1\) produces 24. To compensate, line spacing is set to \textit{just enough}:

\linespread{1.905}

Though not explicitly denounced in the Handbook, most MLA-style papers don’t hyphenate or adjust spacing for pretty typesetting.

\hyphenpenalty=10000
\pretolerance=10000

4.3 Paragraphing

The Handbook specifies half-inch first-line indentation for every paragraph and no extra spacing in between.

\setlength{\parindent}{0.5in}
\setlength{\RaggedRightParindent}{\parindent}
\setlength{\parskip}{0em}
\setlength{\topsep}{0em}
\setlength{\partopsep}{0em}

\LaTeX{} does not indent the first paragraph after headings by default. Thankfully, the fix for this is simple.

\let\@afterindentfalse\@afterindenttrue
\@afterindenttrue

Orphans and widows are explicitly banned\(^2\). For the odd case in which papers must be consistently 24 lines (i.e. explicitly allowing orphans and widows), the \texttt{fullpage} option may be used (see section 2).

\ifMLA@fullpage
\widowpenalty=0
\clubpenalty=0
\interlinepenalty=0
\else
\fi

\(^1\)Microsoft Word 97 through 2016, and likely following versions as well.
\(^2\)According to the MLA itself: \url{https://style.mla.org/orphaned-words/}
As a heinous crime against the art of typesetting, the *Handbook* advises flush-left/ragged-right alignment. (This is achieved with the `ragged2e` package.)

noindent The `noindent` environment doesn’t work as expected in conjunction with `ragged2e`, hence the re-definition.

4.4 Page layout

With few exceptions, the US uses “letter-size” paper. The paper size was already set when loading the `article` class in section 1.

Furthermore, the *Handbook* dictates uniform one-inch margins on said paper. This was already set by the `fullpage` package as loaded in section 3. The `\textheight` and `\textwidth` definitions are here just for good measure.

4.5 Running head

The running head in MLA style is simply the author’s surname (if defined) followed by the current page number, right-aligned, unless specified otherwise using the `nopageheader` option (see section 2). This is managed using the `fancyhdr` and `xstring` packages.
The following code is largely a hack to align the header in the middle of the one-inch margin above the body text.

\setlength{\headheight}{18pt}
\setlength{\headsep}{12pt}
\setlength{\voffset}{-34pt}

5 Document markup

5.1 The header

\title The \texttt{title}, \texttt{author} and \texttt{date} macros work as expected. However, if your surname contains a space, you must contain the surname in braces as such:\texttt{author\{Ludwig \{van Beethoven\}}. This keeps the full surname in the running head (see section 4.5).

The following header commands are unique to the \texttt{mla} class.

\author The instructor who assigned the paper, i.e. Dr. Marjorie Stewart.
\newcommand*{\professor}{1\{\gdef\@professor{#1}}

\course The course for which this paper was assigned, i.e. ENGL 101-02.
\newcommand*{\course}{1\{\gdef\@course{#1}}

To prevent undefined behavior, the internal macros used to store the above information are set empty, except for \texttt{date}. (Note the use of \texttt{mladate}; see section 1.)

\makemlaheader This command finally prints out the standard four-line MLA header, as well as the title.
\newcommand{\makemlaheader}{%}
% for some reason, this blank line is necessary
\maketitle is directly aliased to \texttt{makemlaheader}.
\renewcommand{\maketitle}{\makemlaheader}
Finally, the header will print at the beginning of every document unless specified otherwise using the `nopaperheader` option (see section 2).

\ifMLA@paperheader
\AtBeginDocument{\maketitle}
\fi

### 5.2 Sectioning

Section headings are neither defined nor discouraged in the *Handbook*, though commonly used in longer papers. Customary section headings are rather straightforward, consisting of the section number in Arabic numerals, a space, and the section name with no special decoration\(^1\).

However, for the sake of clarity, the section headings in this class will be set in small-caps by default. Plain, unnumbered and entirely unformatted section headings can be achieved using the `plainheadings` option (see section 2). For custom headings other than these, refer to the `fancyhdr` package documentation.

\renewcommand{\thesection}{\@arabic\c@section}
\renewcommand{\thesubsection}{\thesection.\@arabic\c@subsection}
\renewcommand{\thesubsubsection}{\thesubsection.\@arabic\c@subsubsection}

Un-fancifying the headings is achieved using the `titlesec` package.

\ifMLA@plainheadings
\titleformat{\section}[block]{\normalsize}{}{0pt}{}
\titleformat{\subsection}[block]{\normalsize}{}{0pt}{}
\titleformat{\subsubsection}[block]{\normalsize}{}{0pt}{}
\else
\titleformat{\section}[block]{\normalsize\sc}{\thetitle.\enspace}{0pt}{}
\titleformat{\subsection}[block]{\normalsize\sc}{\thetitle.\enspace}{0pt}{}
\titleformat{\subsubsection}[block]{\normalsize\sc}{\thetitle.\enspace}{0pt}{}
\fi
\titlespacing*{\section}{0pt}{0pt}{0pt}
\titlespacing*{\subsection}{0pt}{0pt}{0pt}
\titlespacing*{\subsubsection}{0pt}{0pt}{0pt}
\titlelabel{}
\patchcmd{\ttl@select}{\strut}{}{}{}
\patchcmd{\ttlh@hang}{\strut}{}{}{}

### 5.3 Lists

*itemize* to the user, *itemize* and *enumerate* lists will function exactly as expected. However, the formatting of the lists must be modified as to preserve double-spacing and adhere to common practice\(^2\); these changes are achieved using the `enumitem` package.

---

\(^1\) According to the popular, oft-referenced OWL: https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/mla_general_format.html.

\(^2\) According to the MLA itself: https://style.mla.org/vertical-lists-in-mla-style/.
5.4 Block quotation

The Handbook dictates blockquotes be set flush a half-inch from the left margin with no extra space on the right. The existing blockquote environment is re-defined for this purpose.

```
\renewenvironment{blockquote}{% 
\list{}{\leftmargin 0.5in} 
\item[] 
\setlength\parindent{0.5in} 
\vspace{-\topsep} 
}{% 
\endlist 
\vspace{-\topsep} 
}
```

5.5 Figures and tables

The Handbook doesn’t specify much of anything about the actual formatting of figures or tables or their captions, so the following is mostly based on the package author’s personal preference and observations.

```
\ifMLA@figures
\setlength{\floatsep}{\baselineskip}
\setlength{\intextsep}{\baselineskip}
\setlength{\textfloatsep}{\baselineskip}
\g@addto@macro\@floatboxreset\centering
\fi
```

Thanks to a bug inherited from the here package which has remained unfixed since 1987\(^1\), there is not only extra space after the figure but the inability to insert a figure within a paragraph. Miraculously, there is a fix for this\(^2\).

\(^1\)See the \texttt{\par} on p. 11, line 249 of \texttt{ltfloat.dtx} from the \LaTeX{} kernel.
\(^2\)See David Carlisle’s answer on \TeX{} SE: \url{https://tex.stackexchange.com/a/310793}
caption Un-fancifying the caption is achieved using the \texttt{caption} package.

In the author’s personal experience, most MLA-style papers use \textit{Fig.} and not \textit{Figure}.

5.6 Paper sections

5.6.1 Paper

paper The main content; the body. This environment exists only for a logical division and does nothing special.

```
5.6.2 Endnotes

notes Endnotes can be typeset manually or with the supported \texttt{enotez} package\textsuperscript{1}.

\textsuperscript{1}Refer to the \texttt{enotez} documentation for instructions.
To correctly format endnotes per common practice\textsuperscript{1}, a custom \texttt{mlanotes} list type will be created. This is achieved with the \texttt{enumitem} package.

\begin{verbatim}
\ifMLA@notes
    \newlist{mlanotes}{description}{1}
    \setlist[mlanotes]{
        parsep=0pt,
        itemsep=0pt,
        topsep=0pt,
        leftmargin=\parindent
    }
\fi
\end{verbatim}

The following initializes the \texttt{enotez} package to use the \texttt{mlanotes} list format.

\begin{verbatim}
\ifMLA@notes
    \DeclareInstance{enotez-list}{mla}{list}{
        heading = {},
        format = \normalsize\normalfont,
        list-type = mlanotes
    }
\setenotez{list-name={},list-style=mla,backref}
\fi
\end{verbatim}

5.6.3 Bibliography

The bibliography can be typeset manually or with the supported \texttt{biblatex} package\textsuperscript{2}.

\begin{verbatim}
\newenvironment{workscited}{
    \newpage
    \begin{noindent}
    \pdfbookmark[0]{Works Cited}{workscited}
    \begin{center}Works Cited\end{center}
    \vspace{-10pt} % XXX to counter unexplained space
}{
\end{noindent}
\end{verbatim}

The \textit{Handbook} prescribes a half-inch hanging indent on all bibliography entries. This is achieved by setting the \texttt{\bibhang} length defined by the \texttt{biblatex} package.

\begin{verbatim}
\setlength{\bibhang}{\parindent}
\end{verbatim}

A Example usage

Following is a basic \LaTeX{} document using the \texttt{mla} class. The document is composed of a text file, \texttt{mla-example.tex}, and a \texttt{biblatex} bibliography file, \texttt{mla-example.bib}.

\textsuperscript{1}According to the popular, oft-referenced OWL: \url{https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/mla_endnotes_and_footnotes.html}.

\textsuperscript{2}Refer to the \texttt{biblatex} documentation for instructions.
A.1 mla-example.tex

\documentclass[mla8]{mla}
\title{Sample MLA Document}
\author{John Doe}
\professor{Dr.\ Suzie Que}
\course{\LaTeX\ 101}
\date{\mladate} % see docs for `\mladate`

% The .bib file (explained later) must be included in the preamble
\addbibresource{mla-example.bib}

\begin{document}
\begin{paper}
This is an example document using `\texttt{mla.cls}'.
The header is automatically printed upon using the `\texttt{paper}' class, which is why there is no `\textbackslash{}maketitle'.

\section{Professors who prefer sections}

Sometimes, research papers can become unmanageably lengthy. In that case, section headings can help divide up the ideas to make it more accessible to the reader. Though this paper is short, section headings are employed as an example of the `\texttt{mla}' class' capabilities.

Some professors may explicitly require or denounce use of headings. Dr.\ Suzie Que of Anytown, PA requires they be used for anything longer than five pages:
\begin{blockquote}
John---so help me God---if you turn in another twenty-page research paper with no logical breaks I will hang you at the stake. Even though the MLA style guide doesn't say anything about section headings, they're not actually prohibited. So, if you turn in \texttt{emph{anything}} longer than five pages to me and there isn't a \texttt{emph{single}} break or section heading, I will dock your grade to an F. Capisce? \cite{que2019}
\end{blockquote}
Despite her language, she does have a point to say.

\subsection{Subsections}

\begin{verbatim}
13
\end{verbatim}
Alongside regular top-level sections, one can use \texttt{\textbackslash{}subsection} commands too. Section commands in \texttt{mla.cls} work identical to those of the \texttt{article} class.

\section{Lists}

Vertical lists are a rarity in MLA format, but if one so pleases, they can be used. The \texttt{itemize'}, \texttt{enumerate'} and \texttt{description'} lists work just as expected, even with sublists.

\begin{itemize}
\item A bogus item
\item Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet. This item has a bunch of text just so it covers more than one line in the paper and shows proper indentation.
\item Last item!
\begin{enumerate}
\item Just kidding; there's a subitem. And it's a number!
\end{enumerate}
\item Okay, now it's the last item.
\end{itemize}

\section{Figures}

On rare occasions, you might have to use figures or tables in your paper. Good news is the \texttt{figure'} and \texttt{table'} environments work exactly as expected! Just make sure to use \texttt{begin\{figure\}[H]} if you want the image to stay exactly where you put it.

\begin{figure}[H]
\includegraphics[width=0.5\linewidth]{mla-example-image}
\caption{A scene from atop Spruce Knob, West Virginia}
\end{figure}

And yes, I shamelessly used my own image.

\section{Using endnotes}

As one may notice, the above subsection used an endnote. These can simply be cited with \texttt{\endnote{more info\ldots}}. Endnotes can be easily printed in correct format by calling \texttt{printendnotes} within the \texttt{notes} environment.
\section{Using bibliographies}

Dr. Suzie Que was cited in the above blockquote. The ins-and-outs of ‘biblatex’ will not be explained in this document, so please refer to online documentation such as the ‘BibLaTeX Cheat Sheet’.

Just as with the endnotes, the bibliography can be easily printed in correct format by calling ‘\textbackslash\texttt{\textbackslash printbibliography[heading=none]}’ within the ‘workscited’ environment. (The ‘\texttt{heading=none}’ part is important; the ‘\texttt{workscited}’ environment already prints one.)

\end{paper}

\begin{notes}
\printendnotes
\end{notes}

\begin{workscited}
\printbibliography[heading=none]
\end{workscited}

\end{document}

A.2 mla-example.bib

@article{que2019,
  author = {Suzie Que},
  title = {Notice to all students},
  journaltitle = {Anytown High School Homepage},
  publisher = {County Board of Education},
  date = {2019-04-20},
  howpublished = {Web},
  urldate = {2019-04-21}
}

@online{price2018,
  author = {Seth Price},
  title = {Spruce Knob Overlook},
  publisher = {Instagram},
  date = {2018-04-15}}
B Change history

\makemlaheader: Changed date format to day month year ... 8
\mladate: Added macro ... 2
\section: Changed heading to small-caps ... 9
\subsection: Changed heading to small-caps ... 9
Properly formatted ... 9
\subsection: Changed heading to small-caps ... 9
Properly formatted ... 9
General: Added support for PDF metadata ... 4
Hid hyperlink boxes in PDF output ... 4
blockquote: Countered unexplained vertical space after environment ... 10
workscited: Countered unexplained vertical space after heading ... 11
notes: Added environment ... 12
Countered unexplained vertical space after heading ... 11

v0.3
General: Added \makealt option ... 3
Improved options parsing to avoid contradiction and undefined behavior ... 3
Replaced obsolete \times package with new \texttt{times} ... 4

v0.4
General: Added \enumerate package ... 4
Added \micromanage package ... 4
Changed \linespacing to print 24 lines per page ... 6
Disabled \micromanage protrusion ... 6
\enumerate: Added list type ... 9
\notes: Changed default endnotes format to \texttt{mla} ... 11
Changed endnotes list type to \texttt{custom mlaendnotes} list ... 11
Removed extra \vspace ... 11
\itemize: Added list type ... 9
\v0.4.1
\makemlaheader: Changed date format back to whatever is inside \@date ... 8
\v0.5
General: Changed options parser to use toggle-switch commands in the style of default \LaTeX classes ... 3
Moved header-printing process to \\AtBeginDocument ... 9
\paper: Removed \newpage ... 11
\workscited: Moved \newpage to beginning of environment ... 12
\notes: Moved \newpage to beginning of environment ... 11
\v0.6
General: Added \caption package ... 4
Added \float package ... 4
Added \graphicx package ... 4
Explicitly set \partopset to 0pt ... 6
\table: Properly formatted ... 10
\caption: Properly formatted ... 11
\figure: Properly formatted ... 10
\v0.7
\mladate: Added August to month list ... 11
\v0.8
General: Changed \micromanage package to only load through \micromanage class option ... 4
Changed options parser to use \ifMLA... toggle format seen in other classes ... 3
Copied code from indentfirst to reduce dependency count ... 6
Replaced regular space after dot in section headings with \enspace .................... 9

workscited: Changed correction spacing from 16pt to 10pt . . . 12

v0.8
General: Removed extraneous spacing and newlines in section headings .................... 9

v0.9
\makemlaheader: Changed to ignore (not print) undefined header macros ................. 8
Fix weird bug where paragraph immediately after \begin{paper} (with no newline) is not indented ...... 8

General: Added fullpage option to explicitly allow widows and orphans .................... 4

Added nofigures and nonotes options to prevent loading unused dependencies ......... 4

Added nopaperheader, nopageheader and noheaders options to enable omission of paper headers, page headers or both paper and page headers respectively ................. 3

Added plainheadings option to forego small-caps and auto-numbering in section headings .................... 4