

Part I: Background

Lesson Title: Making MLA Manageable (MMM—yum!)

Discipline: English Composition

Course Name: English 1A: College Reading and Writing

(Sections: 6360, 6375; 6367, 6362)

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Rationale for this study: Many students find MLA conventions difficult, irrelevant and boring. Yet, MLA documentation is an integral and indispensable part of research paper writing, which is required for almost all majors. So, teaching students to give standard MLA in-text citations and to prepare corresponding bibliography entries under ‘Works Cited’ has become both a need and a challenge to English 1A instructors.

Abstract

This lesson aims to help students understand *why* MLA documentation is needed and *how* MLA can be used to make research papers credible and strong. Efforts are made to make the MLA learning relevant, non-intimidating and even fun to students. The MLA lessons, conducted separately by Elise Geraghty and Joy Zhao in their college composition classes at El Camino College, have produced highly promising results: (1) Most students show that they understand the relationship between research paper writing and MLA documentation; (2) Most (over 79%) students show that they know *how* to cite sources and prepare bibliography entries for their research papers; (3) More importantly, the MLA lessons have succeeded in engaging students and making them more interested in scholarly writing and MLA documentation, turning them into potential researchers.

Part II: The Lesson

Content Focus: Procedure:

Students will learn the acceptable and standard way to use sources and document them, MLA style, for a research paper.

Essential Questions:

For Instructor:

Most students find research paper and MLA boring, irrelevant, and difficult. And every semester witnesses cases of plagiarism. So, what can we do to make students understand research expectations, help them learn the acceptable ways to use sources, and make MLA relevant, accessible and fun?

For Students:

During your research, you encounter a particularly surprising fact or opinion which you want to use to support a point in your research paper. You also realize that most readers tend to find this fact or opinion very hard to believe. So, what can you do to make this fact or opinion clear and convincing? In other words, how can you use standard MLA both inside your research paper and in ‘Works Cited’ at the end of the paper to establish

the *credibility* of this fact or opinion so as to enable your readers to “go see for themselves”?

Learning Outcome:

Given a hard-to-believe fact or opinion, students can (a) quote the key words and cite the source using standard MLA in-text citation; (b) provide a standard corresponding bibliography entry under ‘Works Cited’ for the source.

Phase 1: Introduction (contextualizing new content and activate prior knowledge):

When was the last time you were debating with someone? Were you able to persuade the other person to believe you or accept your opinion? If yes, what did you do that worked? If not, why not? In retrospect using your 20/20 hindsight, what do you think you *could* have done to be more convincing? And what *could* the other person have done to make you accept his or her view?

When writing research papers, you have an even bigger need to be convincing because you often need to present hard-to-accept views of others and hard-to-believe facts. Moreover, you want your readers to take the info you give in your research paper seriously, and in turn, take you—the research writer—seriously.

How? Let’s learn step by step. First, you will understand WHY you need to do things a certain way when using research info. in a paper. Two, you will learn HOW to use sources in an acceptable way: quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing with standard MLA citations. We will focus on quoting first.

Phase 2: Presentation:

The instructor will go over ‘Levels of Credibility’ handout or PP file in class to demonstrate, through the examples, the different levels of *credibility* as resulted from HOW a fact/opinion is presented. (See the attached handout/file.)

Phase 3: Independent Practice:

Students will be asked to quote a strong sentence from a given article or from his/her research in a written sentence. The goal is for them to make the info. clear and convincing, using MLA in-text citation and preparing a bibliography entry for the source. They will write everything down.

In pairs, students will then check each other’s quote, citation and bibliography entry; point out problems regarding source use and MLA; and give a ‘Credibility’ rating (1-10, 10 being *most credible*).

Phase 4: Consolidation:

To check and see how well students can handle research writing, they will take a quick survey-quiz game given in ‘Who Wants to Be a Candy-naire’—(see the attached file).

Now, students should be able to handle the essential question: How to present info. with credibility in research paper writing—with MLA in-text citations and bibliography entries.

Materials Needed:

- Overhead Projector or PowerPoint
- Handouts demonstrating “Levels of Credibility” (based on Joy Zhao’s handout)
- Article containing hard-to-believe facts or views, with clear source info
- ‘Who Wants to Be a Candy-naire’ file (by Joy Zhao)

Part III: Results of the Lesson

[**Note:** Elise and Joy had slightly different approaches but the lesson fundamentals were about the same, and both produced encouraging results.]

MLA Lesson and Results by Elise Geraghty:

Step 1: I modified Joy Zhao’s game-quiz, ‘Who Wants to be a Candy-naire?’ into a briefer version entitled “What Do You Know about MLA?” I gave the quiz first and then we reviewed the answers together. The students kept the quizzes with their notes for later review.

Step 2: While they were taking the quiz, I wrote a hard-to-believe fact on the board:

- “95% of all murder warrants in Los Angeles involve illegal aliens and 2/3 of all felony warrants are for undocumented illegal aliens.”

When we finished with the quiz, I asked them what they thought about the statement on the board and, naturally, many students questioned its validity. They had a *lot* of questions.

[*Note:* this is a very relevant topic to my students because many are writing their research papers about immigration as it is one of our class themes. Everybody is required to address the immigration issue at one point in the semester.]

I then handed them each a copy of Joy Zhao’s “Levels of Credibility” handout, which I had modified to fit the illegal immigration theme. We went over the handout one step at a time, noting the increased levels of credibility.

Step 3: Working in pairs and using their own sources (this was 5 days prior to the research paper due date and they had their sources with them), the students wrote their own in-text citation aiming for the “research-oriented” level of credibility (8-10) along with the matching ‘Works Cited’ bibliography entries.

I walked around the room checking in and helping the pairs until we were ready to put some examples on the board (both in-text quotes and matching bibliography entries).

I allowed (and encouraged) flawed examples on the board; I then facilitated discussion by asking leading questions about what might be incorrect about a particular citation and had the student correct it—until all examples on the board were correct.

Step 4: Revisiting the Essential Question. Working pairs, students revisited the Essential Question.

The students were very engaged throughout the entire lesson. I believe this is in large part because they were actually building their own research papers during the lesson. The questions were relevant to them and they were most definitely paying attention!

Assessment: I have since received the research papers. Of 24 research papers:

- Excellent MLA documentation (flawless) 3
- Satisfactory MLA documentation (minor errors/omissions) 10
- Inadequate MLA documentation (confusing errors/omissions) 7
- Faulty MLA documentation (major problems--difficult to find source) 4

The categories may be oversimplified but the most notable outcome is that over 80% of papers did not fail because of faulty MLA conventions, and 65% did not lose points due to MLA errors. The latter number is very high compared to previous semesters and I am very pleased with this outcome.

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MLA Lesson and Results by Joy Zhao:

Step 1: To put the lesson in context and to prepare the class, I asked students to do a quick write and give the following info:

1. research question
2. main points / sub-questions
3. # of sources found so far
4. # of quotes found so far
5. any problems

(10 minutes)

Step 2: I asked the class if any one had a debate or argument recently. The class appeared a bit surprised at my question, but 6 hands were up. I asked one to tell the class what it was about and whether she was able to convince the other person. She told the class that she believed that big cars contribute to global warming and should be restricted in some way. Her physics-major friend did not believe her and argued that nature has its way to balance things up and fix whatever problems. I then asked her who won the argument at the end. She told the class yes she did. I then asked her HOW she was able to convince her friend. She told me she found this article in Los Angeles Times with

statistics and showed it to her friend the next day. To the class, I emphasized the fact that ‘evidence’ was what enabled her to convince her friend.

I asked another student to share. This student told the class he was *not* able to make his friend believe that Mazda has been rated above Toyota this year. His friend got offended and accused him of being spiteful since his friend loved his Camry. So, they just kept arguing and getting nowhere. I asked him, “Now, in retrospect, what do you think you *could* have done to make him believe you?” He thought a second and said, “I could have found the latest ratings on the web—pretty sure I can find them in Consumer Report and showed the info. to him. I just heard the ratings in the radio.” I thanked him and stressed again the importance of having “credible **evidence**.”

[Other topics came up were a younger brother’s immature behavior, the Iraq War, a girlfriend’s over spending.]

At the end of informal sharing, I said to the class: “When writing research papers, we depend even more on credible evidence to be convincing. Evidence comes from reliable sources, and credibility is based on standard documentation. That’s why we use documentation styles like MLA. Everything comes down to *evidence* and *credibility*. How we present info does give the info different levels of credibility.”
(10 minutes)

I then asked the class the ‘Essential Question’: If given a hard-to-believe fact, do you know how to present it in a credible way? ...

[The activity worked well and provided a smooth transition to the MLA lesson. Students were interested and involved.]

Step 3: The class then went over the PowerPoint file ‘Levels of Credibility’ which demonstrates, through examples, different levels of credibility. Also, it contains info on how to quote, paraphrase, and summarize—the basic source use skills—with examples for MLA citations and bibliography entries.
(10-15 minutes)

Step 4: I asked the class to find a relevant quote from a book (they were asked to bring 2 books to class that day), a quote that can support one main point, and then, cite the source by following the example on the screen.

Then, I asked them to write a bibliography for that quote. Again, I showed the model entry and asked them to follow it to the T.
(10 minutes)

Step 5: Students pair up to check each other’s quote, citation, and bibliography entry. I asked them to point out any problems and help each other correct the documentation errors. They recorded the problems with their initials.
(10 minutes)

[Originally, I planned to ask students to give each other a what I can ‘Credibility Rating’; I felt in class that such rating might not be of much help since students still did not know enough about MLA to feel confident to do this. So, I decided not to use it.]

I collected their quote, citation, and bibliography at the end of class.

Assessing the Results

I graded my students’ quotes, in-text citations and bibliography entries, using the 10-point system and these criteria:

- **-5:** Giving *no* quotation marks for the short quote, *no* in-text citation, or *no* bibliography entry (students showed little understanding of research and MLA--failing performance)
- **-3:** Source use not very clear or accurate (students showed effort to acknowledge sources, but lacked ability to make things clear)
- **-2:** MLA style problems (student made effort to document sources, but lacked ability to make documentation standard--e.g., bibliography or citation missing info or having extra info)
- **-1:** Language or format problems (adequate MLA in-text citation and bibliography entry, yet some minor problems with capitalization, punctuation, spelling)

Teaching Outcome Findings

<u>Point</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
10	15%
9	27%
8	27%
7	9%
6	7%
5	15%

As reflected in these percentages, the majority of the students had learned pretty well:

- 42% performed at the A-level (10-9)
- 78% performed at the passing level (10-7)
- 22% failed (6-5)

Concluding Words

Despite the positive results, the lesson on MLA can be further improved so as to help even more students to handle MLA well. In our research, we have about 21% of the students who did not perform at the passing level regarding MLA at the end of the lesson.

To improve teaching, we should prepare a series of related lessons plans at different stages of research paper. This is a plan for teaching research paper writing in 3-4 weeks:

1. Lesson on research (purpose, topic, focus, process, note-taking)

2. Lesson on MLA in-text citations + bibliography entries
3. Lesson on quoting with MLA documentation
4. Lesson on paraphrasing with MLA documentation
5. Lesson on summarizing with MLA documentation
6. Lesson on organizing a research paper

Part IV: Appendix

- 'Levels of Credibility' handout / PowerPoint file (created by Joy Zhao)
- 'Who Wants to be a Candy-naire' handout / PowerPoint file (created by Joy Zhao)
- Modified 'Level of Credibility' handout (modified version by Elise Geraghty)
- 'What Do You Know about MLA' handout (modified version by Elise Geraghty)