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ENG 201 English Composition

02 Mar 2020

State Your Case: an MLA Paper on How to Write an MLA Paper

The defendant was in deep trouble. He was being accused of treason. His entire future rested upon how his lawyer presented his case. The lawyer's job was to defend his client's innocence to the best of his ability. He needed to prepare his witnesses on how to deliver their testimonies properly and vet his experts so that only those with true credentials would appear before the jury. Tangible property had to be handled through a strict chain of evidence to ensure authenticity. During the trial, he had courtroom etiquette rules to follow to maintain order and professionalism.

Likewise, a student may approach preparing a research paper as a lawyer prepares and delivers his case. The purpose of a research paper is to present firm evidence to prove a point or point of view. Facts need to be prepared for proper delivery and only valid resources should be used. Evidence should be properly cited for authenticity. For order and professionalism, presentation standards need to be followed. The Modern Language Association (MLA) format, combined with the proper use of basic composition skills, will provide a solid framework for quality research papers.

Format

A lawyer does not enter a courtroom, empty his briefcase on the judge's bench, and begin rambling to the jury. The order of events, required documentation, physical evidence, and presentation are vital components of the process. Likewise, a research paper is not just a pile of facts. The evidence that supports the main idea must be presented in a logical fashion and

according to specific rules. One acceptable research paper format is that laid out by the Modern Language Association (MLA). Although lawyers may vary in their investigative styles and delivery techniques, and students may vary in their choices of research and some aspects of paper presentations, most MLA rules are not negotiable, similar to standard courtroom procedures.

Everything in a courtroom has a location: the judge is front and center, the jury sits to one side, the lawyers and those they represent face the judge, etc. Likewise, research papers have specific formats. Note that the instructor/professor is the judge and jury – any exceptions to this format or questions of content must be discussed and approved in advance. Text should be typed with 12-point Times New Roman font and pages should be printed on one side only (not front and back). Page margins need to be one-inch on both sides and on the bottom, with double spacing between each line. Every paragraph should start with a standard half-inch indentation, which is one Tab for most computer programs. Any page or word minimum requirement given by the instructor will not include the initial heading, Works Cited, or any appendices.

MLA permits two formats to begin research papers. Each instructor will decide on the format required for his/her course(s). If a title page is required, an outline is also required. The alternative to a title page/outline is a header, such as the one used for this paper. The first line should be the writer's first and last name; the second, the instructor's title (Dr., Professor, or Instructor) with his/her first and last name; the third line is the course number and title; and the last is the date. Unless otherwise specified by the instructor, the header format is acceptable.

Each page is to have a page number designation in the top right corner, one-half inch from the top of the page as shown above. The author's last name should come directly before the

page number, both in 12-point Times New Roman font. If using Word, these page numbers can be programmed to show up automatically.

Written grammar rules apply to all research papers. Although ‘ain’t got none’ and ‘Can I come with?’ may be verbally acceptable in some households, no lawyers would say such phrases in court. Academic research papers should also steer away from using ‘I’ unless the instructor allows/requires personal reflections to be presented as part of the research presentation. Even if an opinion is implied, the writing should not use first person. The use of “I believe,” “I think,” etc., would only weaken the lawyer’s argument by implying that the facts presented are not necessarily true. If asked for an opinion, the writer should state it as if it were fact. One of the many informative sections within the Harvard College Writing Center website deals specifically with grammar (Cooper). These format requirements (font, heading, spacing, page numbering, proper grammar, etc.) are non-negotiable and will affect the final grade.

Introduction and Thesis Statement

The initial heading or title page/outline should be followed by a title and an introductory paragraph. The title should be centered to the page, but not in bold, underlined, or italicized. As lawyers may vary in how they deliver their opening remarks, a variety of methods may be used for the introductory paragraph. It should start with something interesting that sets up the topic, a “hook” that will make the reader want to read the paper. It may contain a short example, anecdote, or questions that lead the reader to think about the topic. It may introduce a controversy that the writer intends to resolve. For this paper, comparing the composition process to a lawyer’s defense process may help the reader identify with an everyday scenario to use as a guide. Whatever the form, this information should lead to the final sentence of the introduction paragraph, called a thesis statement, which clearly states the point of the paper.

A well-constructed thesis statement is absolutely essential for a quality research paper. The thesis statement is the point the writer is proving. For example, the lawyer mentioned in the opening paragraph needed to prove that his client was not guilty of treason. In his opening remarks, he would have tried to make the jury identify with his client (opening paragraph) and stated the non-guilty conclusion to which he wanted the jury to arrive (thesis statement). The thesis statement serves two purposes: it should guide the writer as he/she gathers evidence and composes the paper, and it will make clear to the reader what the paper is about and the point of view that the writer intends to support. Every paragraph throughout the paper needs to directly support its thesis statement.

Content

The thesis statement introduces and sets the parameters for the paper. Each paragraph is like a witness or a piece of evidence to support the lawyer's position. It is important to note that, as interesting as some of his research may have been, the lawyer should only use what supported his case. Movie watchers are well familiar with attorneys saying, "Your honor, I fail to see the relevance of this line of questioning." Likewise, if research leads to information that does not pertain to the thesis statement, it should not be used, no matter how fascinating. Each and every paragraph within the paper needs to support the thesis statement.

The thesis statement should be supported by at least three main points. If the lawyer's case hinged on only one testimony or one piece of evidence, his client would most likely be in deep trouble. However, if he had several trustworthy witnesses and supportive documents, the jury would be more inclined to agree with his conclusions. Similarly, if research cannot support the thesis with at least three major points, it may be too narrow a topic, in which case it should be adjusted accordingly, or the writer should dig deeper. Major points may be presented in a variety

of ways – by order of significance, chronologically, in order of development, etc. While working on a rough draft, a wise self-check would be to read the opening paragraph, the first sentence of every paragraph, and the closing paragraph. Did those sentences lead to the thesis destination? If not, what needs to be adjusted to strengthen the case? It is vital to a strong paper that all information stays within the parameters of the thesis statement.

To help the reader, section headings may be used to call attention to the main points that support the thesis statement. These often help the reader follow the flow of the content. Section headings are not required, but if the author chooses to use them, the headings can be bolded and should be uniform in font and phrasing, as exemplified in this essay. Short phrases or complete sentences are both acceptable as long as the pattern is the same throughout the paper. If a heading falls on the last line of a page, it should be moved to the top of the next page. The Little, Brown Handbook (Fowler and Aaron 120) provides excellent guidelines for heading usage.

Citations

Providing validity to the points of a research paper requires a consistent method of presentation. Lawyers cannot produce objects to support their case without going through a proper chain of evidence. If a weapon was found, it would have to be “bagged and tagged” to clarify who found it, where it was found, and when it was found. Whoever found that evidence would likely have been called upon to give testimony to its authenticity. Likewise, a research paper requires research, not just personal opinion. Where the evidence is found is essential in defending the facts that support the thesis statement.

Citations inform the reader of what publications have been used to verify the evidence. *The Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL)*, a website designed to guide proper construction of research papers, states that proper use of MLA provides not only credibility, but it also, “can

protect writers from accusations of plagiarism, which is the purposeful or accidental uncredited use of source material by other writers” (Russell et al.). All resources used in presenting information must be noted.

Two ways to prove where the evidence originated are with in-text citations throughout the paper and in the Works Cited section at the end of the paper. One textbook states that, “for most sources, you will provide the author’s or authors’ last names and a page reference” (Fowler and Aaron 645). Note that two examples were just used as examples of in-text citations. After the short quotations, the authors’ last names were noted in parentheses. The name(s) used should match the first word of the alphabetically listed resource in the Works Cited section. Note a difference between the two examples: the Fowler listing has a page number, but the Russell listing does not. The Russell work is a website that does not use page numbers; therefore, a page number is not necessary.

All eyewitnesses, experts, and evidence that a lawyer uses to build his case must be documented properly. He is responsible for compiling a witness list so the opposing counsel can prepare their cross examination. At the end of an MLA research paper, the materials used to support the content of the research paper need to be listed in a section called “Works Cited.”

Note that cited is not spelled wrong. Sighted is used for vision or in phrases such as, “he was short-sighted in his reasoning.” To cite is “to quote (a passage, book, author, etc.), especially as an authority” or “to mention in support, proof, or confirmation” (“cited” 2018).

All reliable resources that are noted throughout the paper must be included in the Works Cited section; however, no source can be listed in that section unless it is specifically mentioned in the body of the paper. The lawyer may have interviewed dozens of witnesses, but only used three for the trial. Only those three would be on his witness list. Similarly, only those references

that were actually used in the paper can be listed. Even if several additional sources were used for research, only those that contributed to the content or validity of the paper can be included. The Works Cited page should always be a separate page, regardless of how long or short the text is on the last page of your report.

Resources today vary from books and printed reference materials to public websites and electronic journals. Since the acceptable formats for each are specific, research in acceptable sources is necessary. For example, Wikipedia may be viewed to discover other acceptable sites, but it may not be listed as an academic reference. If a reference listed by Wikipedia is used directly, then that reference should be cited within the paper.

Online research has changed how works should be cited, both within the text as well as in the Works Cited section. There are some basic guidelines that can be gleaned by looking through this paper and at the Works Cited section at the end of the paper. It is advisable, however, that students buy their own copy of the MLA Handbook or use a library copy. The most recent edition to date is the 8th edition; its citation is listed in the Works Cited list for this essay. There are also several online resources. There are too many types of resources – books, periodicals/journals, websites, online professional sites, etc. – to cover in this paper. Readers should be able to follow the information provided to go directly to that particular source. Once a rough draft is complete, a writer may catch possible mistakes by trying to find the reference himself/herself by using only the information provided both in the paper and in the Works Cited section.

The Conclusion

The closing paragraph should summarize the paper, just as a lawyer summarizes his case in closing arguments. With confidence, the writer should rephrase the thesis statement so the

reader has the final destination in mind, summarize the main points that supported the thesis, and conclude with remarks that sum up the point or point of view. In his summation, the lawyer in our opening paragraph may have used closing remarks that sounded something like this: “My client is not guilty of treason (thesis) because of the testimonies you have heard and the evidence you have seen (noting the particularly valuable main points and supportive evidence/testimony). Therefore, my client should be found not guilty of all charges (final conclusion that he wanted the jury should reach).” Additionally, the conclusion may tie in the “hook” used to gain the readers’ attention in the introduction, making a powerful final impression.

Three cautions should be observed while writing a conclusion. First, no new information should be given. If the writer believes a point has not been covered that supports the thesis statement, it needs to be inserted in the body of the paper. Second, comments already noted as to opposing views may be summarized, but only if they support the thesis. Our lawyer might have said, “The prosecution wants you to believe that he is guilty because..., but we have proven that...” He was not bringing up doubts that may have arisen during the trial, but rather, delineating items that supported his case. Likewise, research paper conclusions should only summarize supportive data. Lastly, uncertainties lead to uncertainties. A trained lawyer would not state in his summation, “I think I may have proven ...” or “I hope that the evidence suggested...” Those statements would leave a jury with doubts. A lawyer who states his case with confidence leads the jury to be confident that his opinion is truth. Research papers should present a topic, provide evidence to support it, and should conclude by drawing the reader to agree that the research presented is true.

In Conclusion

A strong thesis statement, well-organized evidence from credible sources, a clear conclusion, and a solid Works Cited section are essential to a strong research paper. 'Packaging' the paper in the proper MLA format supports its academic structure. Thinking through the process as a lawyer defending his client may guide the writer in deciding the type of information to include and how it needs to be arranged. The writer should convince the reader that the information presented is, without a doubt, the best factual solution or opinion. A solid research paper should make any seasoned lawyer proud.

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