

On Preparing and Word Processing a Works Cited Page: A Basic Outline

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The key "rules" about Works Cited pages from the MLA's point of view are that

- the information about each item should be complete enough so that any reader should be able to find a copy of exactly the source that is being cited
- the information about each item is represented in a consistent and conventional way that insures that the necessary information for the above bullet point is complete and easy to locate. (In other words, each item follows a standard and conventional organization as given in the MLA Handbook).

The key "rules" about Works Cited pages from your word processor's point of view are that

- each item should be formatted in a separate paragraph as a "hanging indent"
- the whole document should be double spaced (not just double spaced between items)
- the items listed should be in alphabetical order based on the last name of the author (or, if no author, on the first word of the title).

Dealing first with the MLA citation conventions...

The most sensible approach here is to consider genre of the source you intend to cite. Look at the table of contents at the beginning of the chapter called "Preparing the List of Works Cited" in the most recent edition of the MLA Handbook. You'll see dozens of possibilities, but the first key distinction to make is whether the item you are looking at is a book (a scholarly monograph, an edited collection, a novel, etc.), a periodical source (a journal article, a review published in a journal, a newspaper, etc.), or an electronic source (a website, page within a website, an electronic journal, etc.).

This is usually an easy distinction to make, but one note of information may be helpful: if you are reading a journal article by way of some electronic database like JSTOR or Project Muse, and if the page you are reading is a PDF scan of the original journal article, you can treat that source exactly as you would treat a print journal. If the article is presented in HTML, however, you'll need to cite the library database and the date of access just as you would with an electronic source. The reason for this difference, by the way, is simple enough: a PDF scan is essentially identical to a photocopy one might make in the library (except, of course, that you can read it on screen); an HTML version, however, has typically been processed through an optical character recognition program (OCR) to convert the print into an electronic file. OCR programs frequently make mistakes, so the HTML version of an article may not be identical to the original print version.

Now, once you've identified the large genre category, see if you can find some item listed in the MLA's table of contents that seems to match closely to the source you need to document. By far the most common ones in English scholarship are the single-authored book, the journal article, the website, and the article from an edited collection (this last can be treated like a "work in an anthology"). When you find what seems to be the right source genre, flip to the appropriate section and see if you can document your source according to the models you find in the MLA. Initially this will take some practice, but after a dozen or so sources you'll find that you get quite familiar with the genres and the MLA documentation formats.

At this point, simply type the appropriate documentation information in the prescribed order into an unformatted paragraph—we'll deal with the layout in a moment. Having been through the procedure with a handful of sources, you'll end up with a document that looks something like this:

Chandler, James and Kevin Gilmartin, eds. Romantic Metropolis: The Urban Scene of British Culture, 1780-1840. New York: Cambridge UP, 2005.
Barrell, John. "London and the London Corresponding Society." Romantic Metropolis: The Urban Scene of British Culture, 1780-1840. Ed. James Chandler and Kevin Gilmartin. New York: Cambridge UP, 2005. 85-112.
Rix, Robert. "'Letters in a Strange Character': Runes, Rocks and Romanticism." European Romantic Review 16(5): 589-611.
Mitchell, Robert. Rev. of Anger, Revolution, and Romanticism, by Andrew M. Stauffer. European Romantic Review 16(5): 633-36.
Peterfreund, Stuart. Shelley Among Others: The Play of the Intertext and the Idea of Language. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2002.
Lincoln, Andrew. "Walter Scott, Politeness, and Patriotism." Romanticism and Patriotism: Nation, Empire, Bodies, Rhetoric, ed. Orrin Wang. May, 2006. Romantic Circles. 3 September, 2008.
<http://romantic.arhu.umd.edu/praxis/patriotism/lincoln/lincoln_essay.html>.

Now it's time for the word processing part of the Works Cited page...

First, we'll format the entries. (I'll use Microsoft Word as the example program here, but virtually all word processing programs will offer the same capabilities.) Use your word processor to highlight the whole list, then click the "Format" and select "Paragraph." You'll see in the "Indentation" section a box called something like "Special." In Word, one of the options for this box is "hanging"—choose that and then, in the box labeled "Line Spacing," choose "double." Finally, click the OK button to apply your formatting to the text you've highlighted. If all goes well, you'll end up with a list that looks like this:

Chandler, James and Kevin Gilmartin, eds. Romantic Metropolis: The Urban Scene of British Culture, 1780-1840. New York: Cambridge UP, 2005.

Barrell, John. "London and the London Corresponding Society." Romantic Metropolis: The Urban Scene of British Culture, 1780-1840. Ed. James Chandler and Kevin Gilmartin. New York: Cambridge UP, 2005. 85-112.

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<http://romantic.arhu.umd.edu/praxis/patriotism/lincoln/lincoln_essay.html>.

Almost done. Now, highlight the whole list once again. This time click the word "Table" at the top of the window, and then select "Sort." It is likely that you'll want to accept the default settings in the "sort text" box, but make sure the processor will sort by paragraph in ascending order with no header row. Then click OK to apply the changes. If all goes according to plan....Presto! you'll have your Works Cited page in proper format and in alphabetical order. Like this:

Barrell, John. "London and the London Corresponding Society." Romantic Metropolis: The Urban Scene of British Culture, 1780-1840. Ed. James Chandler and Kevin Gilmartin. New York: Cambridge UP, 2005. 85-112.

Chandler, James and Kevin Gilmartin, eds. Romantic Metropolis: The Urban Scene of British Culture, 1780-1840. New York: Cambridge UP, 2005.

Lincoln, Andrew. "Walter Scott, Politeness, and Patriotism." Romanticism and Patriotism: Nation, Empire, Bodies, Rhetoric, ed. Orrin Wang. May, 2006. Romantic Circles. 3 September, 2008. <http://romantic.arhu.umd.edu/praxis/patriotism/lincoln/lincoln_essay.html>.

Mitchell, Robert. Rev. of Anger, Revolution, and Romanticism, by Andrew M. Stauffer. European Romantic Review 16(5): 633-36.

Peterfreund, Stuart. Shelley Among Others: The Play of the Intertext and the Idea of Language. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2002.

Rix, Robert. "'Letters in a Strange Character': Runes, Rocks and Romanticism." European Romantic Review 16(5): 589-611.

A few additional notes:

- The MLA Handbook says to underline book titles and the names of journals. Given the power of contemporary word processors, it may be that italics rather than underlines will look better. If you are inclined to use italics, you'll want to clear this with your instructor. In any event, you should use EITHER italics OR underlines—never mix these special fonts in the same paper.
- The Works Cited page should appear on a separate page at the end of your essay. To make this happen, put the cursor at the beginning of the Works Cited list, click "Insert," then "Break," then "Page break."
- Some word processors—Open Office Writer, for example—format hanging indents somewhat differently than Microsoft Word. (In OO, the trick is to indent the whole paragraph by .5" and then "indent" the first line by -.5".) Likewise, the "sort" function may be in some different place than under "Table" as it is in Word. The key point here is to recognize that word-processing is not typing. Whatever your particular program might be, you'll need to learn how to accomplish the necessary steps to format the entries appropriately—and that does NOT mean ending each line with "Enter" and then using tabs and spaces to line up individual lines.
- If you have sources that you need to list by title rather than by author—especially if these titles are placed in quotation marks (article titles for example)—you'll want to leave off any punctuation and leave off introductory articles ("a," "an," "the"). These elements can throw off the alphabetizing function of the word processor. Once you have been through all the steps noted above, you'll need to go back through your list of citations and add it the appropriate articles and punctuation.