

A Review of the *MLA Handbook, Eighth Edition (2016)*

Modern Language Association of America, 2016. *MLA Handbook* (8th ed.). New York, NY: Modern Language Association of America.

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In his 2014 article "References, Please," Tim Parks asks a question that many of us have either heard or asked ourselves: "Are we never going to acknowledge that modern technology has changed things?" *Things*, for Parks, means the landscape of scholarship and its citation practices. While he is partly venting frustration in his article, Parks is also asking an important question: is a rigorous citation style, like that prescribed by the MLA, necessary in the age of Google? Do we need to vex ourselves trying to find the page number for a quote in a book we read electronically when that quote can often be found simply by typing it into a search engine? Does including information about the publisher and its home city really increase the quality of research?

Probably not. But formal citations do play an important role in scholarship, according to Kathleen Fitzpatrick, the principal writer of the 8th edition of the *MLA Handbook*. In her response to Parks and defense of (MLA's) citation style, "The Future of Academic Style: Why Citations Still Matter in the Age of Google" (2016a), Fitzpatrick argues that citation practice might be *the* thing that centralizes scholarship, even more so than a discipline's "subject matter, its vocabulary, or its syntax.... Citations in academic writing ... are intended to refer the questioning reader back to the sources or precedents for the argument at hand." By which she means, citations are the mechanism through which academic conversations take place. So while few people outside of the English department and Humanities fields might pay attention to the MLA, the conversations spurring and responding to the most recent changes of its "style Bible" serve as a compelling example of similar conversations that have and will continue to occur throughout academia.

As evidenced by Fitzpatrick's (2016a) response to Parks, the 8th edition of the *MLA Handbook* is shaped by an awareness of the growing disinterest and outright criticism of its rigid style from the digital community and others with similar proclivities. The homegrown attribution approaches of Internet users (replete with their "h/t" and hyperlink) have become too popular for the MLA to ignore. Thus, Rosemary Feal, the Executive Director of the MLA, writes in the "Foreword" to the 8th edition, "We release new editions of the *MLA Handbook* when developments in scholarly research and writing call for changes in MLA style. The eighth edition brings one of our greatest shifts ever" (2016, viii). That shift is rooted in the MLA's interest in focusing not on a prescription of correct form but "on the writer's decision making" (Fitzpatrick, 2016b, xii). And while that shift might not fully attend to Parks' (2014) suggestion to "wipe the slate clean," this new approach does result in a dramatically different, and arguably better, product.

Perhaps, what is most notable about the latest edition of the *MLA Handbook* is not what *is* present but what *is not* present, which is quite a lot. Fitzpatrick and her collaborators ended up with a print edition that is roughly half the size of the previous edition (from 292 pages in the 7th edition down to 146 in the 8th), with a proportional discount in price (\$22.00 down to \$12.00). That reduction also finds its way into the title, which no longer carries the phrase "for Writers of Research Papers." The loss of the language in the title is especially telling of the attention this latest edition pays to digital communities and the MLA's interest in maintaining contact with current pedagogical practices. Although these reductions might be a welcome change for some readers, they might also irk others who appreciated the depth and breadth of information covered in previous editions.

The most tangible and principal result of the renovated perspective is a citation template almost certainly inspired by a variety of online citation generators. The template is built around nine core elements: author, title, title of container, other contributors, version, number, publisher, publication date, and location. These elements aren't really any different from before, but their presentation is. In the old format, the MLA simply listed the many different formulas and models that writers would use to create citations. In the new presentation, readers first encounter the template graphic listing each element in order followed by the appropriate piece of punctuation that should be used in the works-cited entry. In the following sections of the *Handbook*, each element is explained with depth sufficient enough to include graphics demonstrating where the element may be found in different sources (e.g., a book, an article, or a blog).

This new edition also adopts the word "container" to represent larger media that contain smaller media, such as a database that contains many articles or a video game that contains a book. (Fitzpatrick specifically mentions a question about this kind of source in her article "The Future of Academic Style: Why Citations Still Matter in the Age of Google"). Fitzpatrick (2016b) takes care to explain this new concept, which results in the juxtaposition of a citation for an article in *The Georgia Review* found in *JSTOR* next to a citation for an episode of *Pretty Little Liars* viewed through *Hulu*.

Certain to cause conversation (and controversy) are two particular changes: the removal of the long list of model citations and the return of URLs. While the 8th edition does contain a handful of model citations, many educators will undoubtedly lament the fact that they no longer can direct students (or themselves) to a model citation for a variety of sources. However, creating a model citation for all possible sources a writer might reference becomes a Sisyphean effort doomed to fail in the end because of the dynamic nature of information in today's (scholarly) landscape. We are constantly creating new types and combinations of sources, and the result of that creation is an impossibly long list of models that is at best incomplete. Accepting and acknowledging this reality provides the MLA with an opportunity to either double down on its past approach or to reinvent itself. Fortunately, Fitzpatrick (2016b) chooses the latter option and adopts an orientation informed more by practice than correctness.

And certainly, the re-appearance of the URL will cause some aestheticians to cringe. URLs, however, can serve a practical purpose by providing readers access to the same source used by a writer, which becomes important as sources continue to proliferate across the Internet challenging our ability to read the same sources peers used to craft their research. This last point might be what Fitzpatrick (2016a) had in mind when she described citation systems as "future-oriented." She writes, "When a reader searches for a quotation, she is likely to turn up not just the original source of that quotation but also a host of copies, borrowings, and reuses, texts in which that quotation appears but from which it did not originate." The strength of academic citations, Fitzpatrick contends in her response to Parks, lies in their ability to reliably guide a reader to the exact source a writer has used. Of course, we might question the reliability of URLs, and the MLA, aware of their imperfect nature, is not holding fast to their inclusion in the works-cited list. Though the MLA does believe the "location" of a source is a core element, they remain open to omitting URLs altogether based upon an instructor's (or presumably a writer's) preference. They also smartly advise writers to use DOIs or permalinks when available.

Both of these changes, however, are the manifestation of a deeper choice the MLA has made. It will be easy to either celebrate or criticize them, but the shift from prescribing model citations to framing a citation practice is an important advancement and one that is attempting to keep in touch with current pedagogical and assessment practices. The MLA's grappling with the juxtaposition between fixity and fluidity, past and future, denotes a profound soul searching for such a foundational organization and a potentially pivotal moment in the evolution of academic citation style. Fitzpatrick (2016a) hopes that the 8th edition becomes a catalyst for a new movement in citation practice "that makes the academic style guide seem less like a misnomer, and more like a set of natural practices through which scholars can help organize the often unruly publications by which we are increasingly surrounded." Thus, the MLA publishes its "groundbreaking" edition "for the digital age" in its interest in staying, well, *modern*.

References

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