

A Rhetorical Comparison of MLA and APA Documentation Styles

©6/2007 Gregory A. Smith

MLA Style	APA Style	Analysis
How are bibliographic references formatted?		
Entries are sorted alphabetically, resulting in the aggregation of signed sources by author name.	Entries are sorted alphabetically, resulting in the aggregation of signed sources by author name.	Both styles provide an effective means of locating a particular source within the list of bibliographic references.
Instructs researchers to transcribe the author's name in full from the original source; researchers are permitted to clarify the author's identity by spelling out an abbreviated name or supplementing a pseudonym with a real name (<i>MSM</i> 156).	Prescribes transcribing the author's surname in full but only the initials of the author's given name(s).	MLA style identifies authors unambiguously, while APA style diminishes the significance of the author's identity and gender.
Shows little concern for date of publication, with this fact listed towards the end of each reference.	Privileges dates of publication through a prominent position in each bibliographic reference and in the sorting of references (<i>PM</i> 219-21).	MLA style values discussion of creative works with no statute of limitations; APA style reveals clearly its orientation toward incremental scientific literature.
Calls for most words in titles to be capitalized and identifies titles with underlining or quotation marks (<i>MSM</i> 97-102).	Calls for very few title words to be capitalized, except in the case of journals (<i>PM</i> 226-27); provides no identifying format or mark for article and essay titles.	MLA style arguably emphasizes that a source is a text—a work—rather than research findings, as in APA style.
Authorizes numerous abbreviations in an entire chapter devoted to the subject (<i>MSM</i> 255-87).	Coverage of abbreviations fits on less than three pages (<i>PM</i> 216-18).	By providing numerous ways to shorten references, MLA style unnecessarily makes preparation of accurate references the privilege of an in-group.
Gives researchers alternatives in the referencing of works with four or more co-authors (<i>MSM</i> 160-61).	Calls for numerous co-author names to be listed in reference lists and parenthetical references (<i>PM</i> 208, 240-41).	Somewhat counterintuitively, APA style requires more author information than MLA—presumably because the incidence of numerous co-authors is much higher in the sciences than in the humanities.
Tends to identify periodical issues by their natural identifiers (<i>MSM</i> 183-90).	Identifies journal issues by year and volume (<i>PM</i> 240); acknowledges documents retrieved from a library's full-text database as such rather than with a URL (231); and lists dissertations by University Microfilms International document number (260-61).	Both styles provide for referencing sources in ways that are consistent with library practice; APA style seems to go furthest in this regard, presumably because it perceives libraries as repositories of authoritative literature.

MLA Style	APA Style	Analysis
Acknowledges the difficulties of documenting electronic sources.	Acknowledges the difficulties of documenting electronic sources.	Both styles are maturing in their understanding of the unique dimensions of acknowledging electronic sources.
Directs researchers to list multiple dates in a reference to an electronic source (<i>MH</i> 211) and calls for elements that are more related to attribution than identification or retrieval.	Minimum elements of a reference to an Internet-based source are "a document title or description, a date (either the date of publication or update or the date of retrieval), and an address" (<i>PM</i> 269).	MLA calls for inclusion of more data about an electronic source than does APA, perhaps revealing its traditional bent.

How are sources treated in the text?		
Has adopted parenthetical referencing as a substitute for more traditional note systems.	Has adopted parenthetical referencing as a substitute for more traditional note systems.	Has opted for a system that is easier for authors and publishers but may compromise the quality of the reading experience.
The primary connection between parenthetical citation and bibliographic reference is the author's last name.	The primary connection between parenthetical citation and bibliographic reference is the author's last name.	In both styles, "surnames become nametags for works" (Connors 239).
Does not call for each parenthetical reference to include the work's date of publication.	Calls for each parenthetical reference to include the work's date of publication.	MLA style shows that it regards old publications with high esteem, while APA style shows that it values priority of research.
Contains detailed instructions concerning such matters as quotation of different kinds of text (prose, poetry, drama, etc.), correction of errors in the original source, ellipsis, indirect quotation, and translation; coverage of quotation amounts to thirteen pages (<i>MSM</i> 102-15).	Generally deemphasizes quotations, with description of the mechanics of quoting sources occupying only five pages of text (<i>PM</i> 117-22).	MLA style provides mechanisms for lengthy, detailed interaction with texts, a feature that is viewed as unnecessary in APA's scientific research.

What sources are valued?		
Gives first consideration to book-length works in a variety of manifestations.	Journal articles receive first consideration (<i>PM</i> 239-47).	Each style treats first what its disciplinary sponsor considers to be the primary vehicle of scholarly communication.
Provisions are made for broadcast and recorded media as well as artistic works and performances, while legal sources and technical reports receive little attention.	There is little provision for documentation of reference sources and audio-visual media (<i>PM</i> 254, 266-68).	Each style emphasizes the types of sources considered valuable by its sponsor community.

MLA Style	APA Style	Analysis
Exhibits little concern for the age of a source (Lindenberger xvi).	Exhibits a preference for current publications by providing means of referencing in-press sources and manuscripts in progress or not yet accepted for publication (<i>PM</i> 241, 253, 263-64).	MLA style values discussion of creative works with no statute of limitations; APA style reveals clearly its orientation toward incremental scientific literature.
Prescribes reference formats for a variety of unpublished sources.	Private correspondence, unpublished interviews, and non-archived electronic communications do not qualify for inclusion in the reference list and thus are cited only in the text (<i>PM</i> 214).	MLA leaves authors and readers to appraise the value of any given source; APA focuses on retrievable literature.
Emphasizes works of significance to research in the humanities: literary texts and other creative works, critical works, editions, sources of historical information, periodical literature, etc.	States a preference for empirical sources (<i>PM</i> 28).	Each style clearly shows its disciplinary affiliation.
Prescribes formats for referencing electronic sources in a separate section—in fact, the final section of the chapter (<i>MH</i> 207-35; <i>MSM</i> 209-29).	Prescribes formats for referencing electronic sources in a separate section—in fact, the final section of the chapter (<i>PM</i> 268-81).	Both styles fall short of giving electronic sources the prominent coverage they deserve in an age of electronic information.
Focuses on prescribing bibliographic formats for electronic sources that are refereed (<i>MH</i> 208) and/or sponsored by an institution or other organization (210).	Privileges on-line journal literature (<i>PM</i> 271-73, 279) and documents posted by an organization—academic or otherwise—that is presumed to disseminate authoritative information (274-75).	Both styles attribute importance to scholarly credibility.
Gives less than prominent treatment to aggregated databases, though these presumably account for a large proportion of articles cited by academic researchers (<i>MH</i> 229-30).	Gives less than prominent treatment to aggregated databases, though these presumably account for a large proportion of articles cited by academic researchers (<i>PM</i> 278-80).	Both styles fall short of giving aggregated databases the prominent coverage they deserve among other electronic sources of information.

What are the purposes of documentation?		
Management of sources, including the mechanics for direct quotation, is arguably at its heart; discussion of in-text citations and works-cited formatting stretches over 102 pages (<i>MSM</i> 153-254).	Portrays documentation in terms of meticulous scholarly procedure, not as the essence of APA style (<i>PM</i> 216); a reference list acknowledges sources cited in a research text.	MLA overtly provides means of engaging in protracted discourse about the creative works of humankind (Lindenberger xxvi); APA style's purposes seem less monumental, though one can infer that citations are to be used rhetorically—not merely economically (<i>PM</i> 28).

MLA Style	APA Style	Analysis
Provides for the prevention of plagiarism (<i>MSM</i> 151).	Discusses plagiarism, though not in a lengthy, prominent, or intimidating manner (<i>PM</i> 349-50).	MLA's tenacious opposition to plagiarism grows out of a disciplinary community in which creative expression in words is of the highest value; APA views source acknowledgment as a means of documenting the incremental nature of scientific research.
Aims to mitigate inequities in academic life by informing all members of the community of the protocols for scholarly productivity (Lindenberger xxiv).		

Works Cited

American Psychological Association. *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. 5th ed. Washington, DC: Amer. Psychological Assn., 2001. [Referred to in table as *PM*]

Connors, Robert J. "The Rhetoric of Citation Systems, Part II: Competing Epistemic Values in Citation." *Rhetoric Review* 17 (1999): 219-45. *Arts and Sciences III Collection*. JSTOR. 26 Sep. 2006 <<http://www.jstor.org/search/>>.

Gibaldi, Joseph. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. 6th ed. New York: Mod. Lang. Assn. of Amer., 2003. [Referred to in table as *MH*]

---. *MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing*. 2nd ed. New York: Mod. Lang. Assn. of Amer., 1998. [Referred to in table as *MSM*]

Lindenberger, Herbert. Foreword. *MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing*. By Joseph Gibaldi. 2nd ed. New York: Mod. Lang. Assn. of Amer., 1998. xv-xxvi.