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Trying to Contain Ourselves: A Dialogic Review of the *MLA Handbook, Eighth Edition*



Janice R. Walker and Erin E. Kelly

Abstract: Since the 2016 release of the Modern Language Association's new style guidelines, scholars and teachers—along with writing centers, libraries, and editorial staffs—have been familiarizing themselves with the changes. Based on a standardized approach to citation, the eighth edition of the *MLA Handbook* asks us to adjust some long-entrenched habits. Perhaps more pressingly, the new MLA format reminds us of enduring pedagogical challenges regarding students' information literacy, habits of source citation, and understanding of knowledge-making. With this issue of *Composition Forum* marking the journal's progression to the new guidelines, we asked two scholars to explore the *MLA Handbook's* significance for our field's scholarly and teacherly work.

MLA Handbook, 8th ed., Modern Language Association, 2016. 146 pp.

Everything Changes—Yet Again

Janice R. Walker

The eighth edition of the *MLA Handbook* takes a different approach to citation from previous editions by foregrounding the elements of citation rather than the different types of sources. *The Columbia Guide to Online Style* (Walker and Taylor) also used this element approach as far back as 1998. Understanding the elements common to a wide variety of sources, the new *MLA Handbook* says, "gives users more freedom to create references to fit their audiences" (vii-viii) and to "better accommodate new media and new ways of doing research" (viii). As I argued in "[Everything Changes, or Why MLA Isn't \(Always\) Right](#)" (Walker 257-69), "by using an element approach and understanding the elements of a citation, it is possible to then fit the elements into the various codes that you may be tasked with following" (265).

MLA now includes a fill-in-the-blanks template, asking for what MLA refers to as "core elements": author name(s); titles of works and/or their containers; versions; publishers; locational elements; and other such features, depending on what elements the user can locate about a given source. In *The Columbia Guide*, the elements included the same information, noting that these elements are "the same for most styles of documentation, although the order in which they are presented may vary" (21): the author, title of article (or Web site), title of larger work, and publication information, including such information as version numbers, URLs and/or place of publication, publisher or sponsor (for online sources), and dates of publication or date of last modification for online sources, as well as the date of access for Web sites and other ephemeral material (Walker and Taylor).

According to The MLA Style Center's "[Works Cited: A Quick Guide](#)," "The concept of containers is crucial to MLA style. When the source being documented forms part of a larger whole, the larger whole can be thought of as a container that holds the source." Perhaps this change in nomenclature will help our students better understand that some works are *contained* by larger works, but we need to do more to help students (and others) differentiate between different types of sources—or containers—as a crucial component of critical evaluation. Not organizing models by type of source also makes the *Handbook* less user-friendly as a quick reference—and does little to help students understand different types of sources. As a result, textbook publishers have already rushed to fill at least part of this gap by providing models for students of commonly used types of sources.

There are also changes in how the elements are presented, such as inclusion of the “p.” or “pp.” designations for page number(s) in bibliographic entries, and the use of the abbreviations “Vol.” and “No.” for journals (e.g., *PMLA*, Vol. 128, no. 1, Jan. 2013, pp. 193-200) (21). Other significant changes include omitting the original publication date for reprinted books and omitting the city of publication. In-text citations, on the other hand, seem to be virtually unchanged.

Happily, MLA no longer asks for a description of the medium of publication and, while they now once again include the URL for online sources, they no longer try to surround it with angle brackets. MLA has also decided not to include the protocol (e.g., <http://>) in URLs, thus avoiding the problem with Word automatically recognizing them as hyperlinks. In the past, MLA had to ask authors to turn off hyperlinks in their word processors, still presuming static print publication. Now, however, even though MLA says that URLs “may be clickable,” authors will have to manually create the hyperlinks in order to make them clickable, since excluding the protocol means that Word will no longer automatically recognize the text as a link. MLA also finally notes that permalinks and/or DOIs may be more useful than URLs, which can change or disappear, and they now include the word “Accessed” before the date of access if one chooses to include this information, which they consider optional.

While recognizing that students may be using online bibliography generators, MLA notes that students still need to understand how to create their own citations. As Principal Investigator for the LILAC Project (Learning Information Literacy across the Curriculum), a multi-institutional study of student information-seeking behaviors, I am seeing students relying heavily on online bibliography generators. However, most bibliography generators require users to first determine the type of source being used before determining the necessary elements. MLA avoids this problem entirely by using a single template to cover all types of publications. Of course, this does little to help students who need to determine the type of source they are using. And, while MLA’s printable template would seem to lend itself well to an electronic citation generator, unfortunately, MLA has not yet taken this step.

Students are confused about how to evaluate sources, with a frightening number of LILAC Project subjects claiming to have been taught that .org sites are “always credible.” Unfortunately, the *MLA Handbook* only briefly discusses how to evaluate sources (see 10-12). Further discussion of elements and the “mechanics” of scholarly writing are presented in Part 2 of the *Handbook*, including brief but welcome information on how to cite sources in “projects other than the research paper” (128), for example, in slide-show presentations, videos, or Web projects, acknowledging that the “research paper” is not the only form in which students will be presenting their researched work. Unhappily, MLA has not deemed it necessary in the eighth edition to expand this coverage, again leaving it for instructors, textbook publishers, and bibliography generators to take up the slack. (For more information on other important information omitted or given short shrift by MLA’s latest edition, see Erin E. Kelly’s review.)

The newest edition of the *MLA Handbook* does include much that I agree with. In an effort to simplify or substantially shorten this important work, however, MLA has, I believe, missed the mark. I can’t help but hope the ninth edition will be out sooner rather than later.

The *MLA Handbook*--Who Is It For?

Erin E. Kelly

People I greatly respect (including Andrea Lunsford, Nancy Sommers, and Dara Rossman Regaignon) have praised the newest edition of the *MLA Handbook* for its flexible works-cited list guidelines. These innovations are admirable, and (as Janice R. Walker explains) concepts like “core elements” and “containers” encourage authors to think critically about the most sensible way to identify various sources they have used. The revised handbook helpfully foregrounds that writers ought to imagine how readers will understand and use the information being presented to them. It seems ironic, therefore, that the handbook authors did not bring such rhetorical awareness to the text they have produced.

MLA handbooks have too long assumed an audience that sees notes (whether endnotes or footnotes) as the default way of offering information about sources. In 1982, *PMLA* argued explicitly to its readers for the advantages of in-text citation for purposes of simple documentation of sources in both Conarroe’s editorial introduction and Heilbrun et al.’s “Report of the Advisory Committee on Documentation Style”; the issue of the journal in which these statements appear also features the first published articles to use MLA-style in-text citations. The second edition handbook (credited to Gibaldi and Ahtert, published in 1984) similarly presumes those who consult it will find in-text citations new, declaring that MLA style allows writers to offer bibliographic or content information in the form of endnotes before offering one brief example of each type of note.

As MLA handbooks have been revised and re-envisioned, however, the experience of their users has changed. Faculty members under fifty and almost all of our graduate and undergraduate students have never known MLA to be anything other than an in-text documentation style. Yet in the seventh edition, explanations of notes take up only one and a half pages of a more than 250-page volume (Gibaldi 230-31); the same brief section of advice and examples appears almost unchanged in MLA handbooks from the second to the seventh edition as well as in the *MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing*. Such scant directions leave undergraduate student writers unsure of how to prepare anything other than a simple citation. Many seem unaware that it is possible to reference information or an argument that derives from more than one source, much less to briefly acknowledge conflicting critical arguments—exactly the sorts of references scholars typically handle in notes. As MLA style has aged, MLA handbooks’ lack of awareness of its readers has become more and more pronounced.

Rather than addressing such problems, the eighth edition compounds them through uncertainty about who its readers are. Rosemary Feal’s foreword speaks of the hope that the revised handbook will meet “the needs of students, teachers, and scholars today and in coming years” (viii), and the introduction states the intention to assist “writers at various levels” (3). Immediately thereafter, the overview of “Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty” presumes an undergraduate writer by framing documentation as a way of staying out of trouble and urging anyone who is “unsure about the way that you are using a particular source” to “check with your instructor” (10). But if undergraduates are the target audience, how helpful will these readers find common abbreviations for books of the Bible and works of Shakespeare (97-101)? Will the direction to handle translations of quotations with “an endnote describing which translations are yours” (91) be of any use to someone who has no idea what an endnote is? (Indeed, the section on translating offers the only mention of notes in the entire eighth edition handbook.)

I admit that clarification of matters relevant to undergraduate writers and developing researchers (as well as to teachers, academic authors, and journal editors) are being addressed in the ever-expanding [online supplement](#) to the handbook. But this website does not make the handbook a more cogent reference work. Even if one admires the ways of handling source information that MLA’s eighth edition models, clearer instructions can be found in the online style center and in Purdue University’s Online Writing Lab’s [MLA overview](#) than in the paper book—and these resources are free. Students and instructors should save the \$12 US that MLA is charging for paper handbooks to buy resources more likely to support their development as academic writers—such as a large cup of coffee?—until a ninth edition becomes available.

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