

MLA, APA, and Chicago Style: What They Are and What They Do

Ben Wetherbee, Sept. 2019

MLA (Modern Language Association)

- Key disciplines: humanities (especially language arts)
- Privileges specific authors and their exact words – tends to be quote-heavy
- Often involves many specific in-text citations, which reference author names and page numbers
- Well-suited to textual analysis especially

APA (American Psychiatric Association)

- Key disciplines: hard sciences and social sciences
- Privileges publication dates (timeliness matters a lot in scientific research)
- Typically favors quick paraphrasing and in-passing citations instead of direct quotes
- In-text citations specify author and year of publication and rarely require page numbers
- Reference list formatting is unforgivably weird, but just roll with it
- Well-suited to impersonal science writing

Chicago

- Key disciplines: social sciences (especially history), business, some humanities
- Usually uses footnotes and endnotes rather than parenthetical citations; allows for uninterrupted prose
- Citations are less obtrusive but sometimes more redundant than MLA's
- Thorough bibliographic information in footnotes makes References pages optional, though often still useful
- Well-suited to scholarly narrative, especially history; often “feels” the least academic of the three

Sample Paragraphs

MLA

Scholars have historically disagreed about how to teach writing. Peter Elbow, for example, has advocated an individualistic process of “growing” through one’s own writing (22-25), while James Berlin argues for a “social-epistemic” classroom that attempts “to place the question of ideology at the center of the teaching of writing” (492). A classroom centered on culture and ideology allows less room to explore how a student “helps words grow” (Elbow 23).

APA

Scholars have historically disagreed about how to teach writing, some stressing individualistic processes of writers’ growth (e.g., Elbow, 1998) and others stressing investigation of ideology and culture in the classroom (Berlin, 1988). Focus on the latter allows less room to explore how a student “helps words grow” (Elbow, 1998, p. 23).

Chicago

Scholars have historically disagreed about how to teach writing. Peter Elbow, for example, has advocated an individualistic process of “growing” through one’s own writing, while James Berlin argues for a “social-epistemic” classroom that attempts “to place the question of ideology at the center of the teaching of writing.”¹ A classroom centered on culture and ideology allows less room to explore how a student “helps words grow.”²

¹ Peter Elbow, *Writing Without Teachers*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 22-25; James A. Berlin, “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class,” *College English* 50, no. 5 (1988): 492.

² Elbow, *Writing Without Teachers*, 23.

Works Cited / References Entries

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Berlin, James A. “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class.” *College English*, vol. 50, no. 5, 1988, pp. 477-94.
Elbow, Peter. *Writing without Teachers*. 2nd ed., Oxford UP, 1998.

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Berlin, J. A. (1989). Rhetoric and ideology in the writing class. *College English*, 50(5), 477-494.
Elbow, P. (1998). *Writing without teachers*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

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(Note that References list entries subtly differ from footnote citations.)

Berlin, James A. “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class.” *College English* 50, no. 5 (1988): 477-494.
Elbow, Peter. *Writing without Teachers*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Some Final Thoughts

Everyone has her or his own favorite citation system. All of them, though, can feel difficult and arbitrary, and none must be memorized in their entirety. You’ll often need to look up specific rules and conventions.

Remember, too, that the broad intellectual and ethical moves of scholarly writing matter more than making sure every comma is in the right place in every in-text citation. That said, it pays to understand the rhetorical functions of each major academic style and the broad strokes of what it means to write within each style. Try your best to appreciate what APA is designed to do, even if as you rip your hair out over its deeply, inexcusably weird reference entry formatting.

The **Purdue OWL** remains an outstanding free, online resource for all things MLA, APA, and Chicago. It’s the best place to look up specifics: https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/purdue_owl.html