

Guide to MLA Parenthetical Documentation

Whenever you quote words, cite facts, or use ideas from an outside source, you must briefly identify that source by author (or title if there is no credited author) and specify where the words, facts, or ideas originally occurred—for instance, by including a page number.

MLA calls this “parenthetical documentation” because the information is placed in a parenthesis. This parenthesis should closely follow the cited material, but at a natural pause in your own sentence—sometimes before a comma or semi-colon, but usually at the end of the sentence.

If you do not name the author in your own sentence, then the parenthesis begins with the author’s last name or, if there is no credited author, the title’s first words (excluding A, An, The). Whether author or title, this element must correspond exactly to the alphabetized entry in your Works Cited list, where full identification is provided.

Together, your parenthetical documentation and Works Cited enable your reader to identify your sources and locate the exact passages you have used. By giving credit where credit is due, they ensure that borrowing does not become theft.

Examples

Rather than clutter this guide with a different source to illustrate each variation in parenthetical documentation, **all examples will refer to a single passage from an imaginary work titled “Transgressing the Student Body: Tattoos and Taboos on the Contemporary College Campus.” The author(s) and the format will vary as needed.**

Long Quotations (more than 4 lines):

These are set off by indenting each line as if for the start of a new paragraph (5 spaces). This indentation indicates that you are quoting, so use no quotation marks, and the line spacing before, within, and after the quotation remains the standard double space.

If the author were Stanley Friedman and the passage occurred on pages 26-27 of his book or article, parenthetical documentation would look like this—

Acquiring a tattoo while attending college can express a wide range of possible motivations, from self-expression to social conformity, from impulsive daring to self-doubt. Motivation may even change over time for a single individual who acquires more than one tattoo. But the common denominator appears to be identity formation, whether as positive process or personal crisis. (Friedman 26-27)

[Note: The information provided is the same as for shorter quotations—in this case an author’s last name and a page number. But unlike shorter quotations, the parenthesis comes after the final period—and is followed by no punctuation mark.]

If you mention the author in the sentence introducing the quotation, then only the page number is required in the parenthesis—

Stanley Friedman believes that he has identified a motivational concept common to virtually all student tattoos:

Acquiring a tattoo while attending college can express a wide range of possible motivations, from self-expression to social conformity, from impulsive daring to self-doubt. Motivation may even change over time for a single individual who acquires more than one tattoo. But the common denominator appears to be identity formation, whether as positive process or personal crisis. (26-27)

Short Quotations (from 1 word to 4 lines):

[**General Note:** If in a single paragraph you cite repeatedly from the same source—with no intervening citations from other sources—then all parenthetical citations after the first one need only contain page numbers.]

One Author:

If the author were Stanley Friedman and the quoted words occurred on page 27 of a book or article, parenthetical documentation could look like one of these—

“Identity formation” appears to be the “common denominator” among reasons college students acquire a tattoo (Friedman 27).

[Note: No comma after the author’s name and no p. before the page number.]

The “common denominator” among motivations for college students’ tattoos is “identity formation” (Friedman 27).

[Note: The parenthesis is placed after any final quotation mark and before the period.]

Stanley Friedman maintains that one “common denominator” among the reasons college students acquire tattoos is “identity formation” (27).

[Note: If you name the author in your sentence, only the page number is required in the parenthesis.]

While Friedman claims that “identity formation” is a “common denominator” (27), he explores a wide range of motivations for acquiring a tattoo.

[Note: When there is a natural pause closer to your citation than the end of the sentence—usually signaled by a comma or semi-colon—you should place the parenthesis there.]

Two Authors:

If the authors were Stanley Friedman and Joyce Lindstrom—

“Identity formation” appears to be the “common denominator” among reasons college students acquire a tattoo (Friedman and Lindstrom 27).

[Note: For multiple authors, use “and” before the final name. See also “Three Authors” below.]

Two or more Authors with the Same Surname:

If your sources include authors with the same surnames, include their initials whenever their names occur in your text.

For example, if your sources contained two authors with the surname Friedman, you will need to add distinguishing initials to the name of each when it occurs in either a parenthetical citation—**(S. Friedman 27)**—or in your own prose—**“J. M. Friedman argues that . . .”**

Three Authors:

If the authors were Stanley Friedman, Joyce Lindstrom, and Henry McCall—

“Identity formation” appears to be the “common denominator” among reasons college students acquire a tattoo (Friedman, Lindstrom, and McCall 27).

or

Friedman, Lindstrom, and McCall argue that “identity formation” appears to be the “common denominator” among reasons college students acquire a tattoo (27).

More than Three Authors:

If the authors were Stanley Friedman, Joyce Lindstrom, Henry McCall, and Susan Hanes—

“Identity formation” appears to be the “common denominator” among reasons college students acquire a tattoo (Friedman et al. 27).

[Note: et al. is a Latin abbreviation for “et alii”--“and others.” There is a period after al.]

Corporate Authors:

A “corporate author” is any group or organization that has published something and provided no individual author names. Because the names of such organizations can be lengthy, MLA recommends that you name them in your introductory text, using the parenthesis for the page number. If you do decide to name them in the parenthesis, use standard abbreviations where possible (see below).

If the quotation was from a publication of the American Academy of Tattoo Artists—

“Identity formation” appears to be the “common denominator” among reasons college students acquire a tattoo (Amer. Acad. of Tattoo Artists 27).

[Note: The two words in the organization’s name that can be clearly abbreviated have been. But remember—any abbreviation of the first word must clearly correspond to the full word that begins the entry in your Works Cited.]

The better option with most corporate authors is to name them in your own introductory sentence, thereby shortening the parenthesis to just the page number.

The American Academy of Tattoo Artists maintains that one “common denominator” among the reasons college students acquire tattoos is “identity formation” (27).

Title/No Author:

In the absence of an individual or group author, a source must be entered under its title—in both the in-text parenthesis and the Works Cited. Use the full title if short, or just the first few words (excluding A, An, The) if long. If shortened, make sure the first word is the same as the first word by which the full title is alphabetized in your Works Cited.

If no author is given for the article “Transgressing the Student Body: Tattoos and Taboos on the Contemporary College Campus,” the parenthesis would look like this—

“Identity formation” appears to be the “common denominator” among reasons college students acquire a tattoo (“Transgressing the Student Body” 27).

[Note: The title has been shortened and because it is an article (or chapter) it is put in quotation marks.]

If this was the title of a book or other self-contained source, the title would be italicized (or underlined, as MLA prefers)—

“Identity formation” appears to be the “common denominator” among reasons college students acquire a tattoo (Transgressing the Student Body 27).

Because titles are likely to be longer than authors' last names, it may be a good idea to name the title in your introductory sentence and confine the parenthesis to the page number—

In “Transgressing the Student Body” we find the persuasive claim that one “common denominator” among the reasons college students acquire tattoos is “identity formation” (27).

Citing Two or more works by the Same Author:

If you cite two (or more) works by the same author, the author's name is not sufficient to indicate which one you are citing. In these cases you must also add a specific title after the author's name. Since this is likely to produce a long parenthesis, either shorten the title as much as possible or mention the author and/or title in your introductory sentence.

For example, if in addition to “Transgressing the Student Body” you also cited a book by Stanley Friedman called *Ink and Other Bodily Fluids*, you could distinguish them in one of these ways—

The “common denominator” among motivations for college students’ tattoos is “identity formation” (Friedman, “Transgressing” 27).

[Note: A comma separates the author and title, but not the title and page number.]

Including a shortened title for Friedman's article distinguishes it from your citations of Friedman's book, such as this—

(Friedman, Ink 207).

Whenever citing multiple works by the same author, the best policy may be to incorporate either the author or the title—or both—into your introductory sentence, thereby shortening the parenthesis—

Stanley Friedman maintains that one “common denominator” among the reasons college students acquire tattoos is “identity formation” (“Transgressing” 27).

[Note: Since Friedman is identified in your sentence, only the specific work and page need be added in parentheses.]

In “Transgressing the Student Body” Stanley Friedman maintains that one “common denominator” among the reasons college students acquire tattoos is “identity formation” (27).

[Note: Since both Friedman and the specific work are identified in your sentence, only the page number is required in parentheses.]

Citing Different Pages from the Same Source:

If you write a sentence that quotes from several places in the same source and you wish to cite them in a single parenthesis, list the appropriate page numbers in the order they are quoted, separated by commas—

Acquiring a tattoo may be an act of “identity formation,” but as such it can be interpreted as a symptom of “profound self-doubt” (Friedman 27, 33).

It may be clearer, however, to break these up when possible—

Friedman claims that acquiring a tattoo may be an act of “identity formation” (27), but as such it can be interpreted as a symptom of “profound self-doubt” (33).

Citing More than One Source in a Single Parenthesis:

On the whole you should probably avoid quoting many different sources in a single sentence, but if you need to cite two or even three different sources for one of your sentences, cite each in one of the standard ways described above, separating them with semi-colons.

For example, if you wanted to cite both Friedman’s article and another source—page 4 of an article by Michael O’Reilly—the parenthesis would look like this—

(Friedman 27; O’Reilly 4).

[Note: Be sure that the sources in your parenthesis occur in the same sequence as the citations in your preceding sentence.]

Or you might wish to cite more than one source by the same author in a single sentence—

Friedman abandons his original thesis that “identity formation” is the key factor in acquiring a tattoo when he later argues that “social conformity” provides the main motive force (“Transgressing” 27; Ink 105).

But in either of the above cases it might be better to incorporate more of the citation information into your own sentence and place shortened parentheses closer to the actual quotations—

Whereas Friedman originally argued in “Transgressing the Student Body” that “identity formation” is the key factor in acquiring a tattoo (27), in Ink and Other Bodily Fluids he abandons this explanation in favor of “social conformity” (105).

Citing the Same Page Several Times in One Paragraph:

If you write a paragraph that quotes more than once from the same page of the same source—and no other source is quoted—you may use a single parenthesis after the last quotation.

Citing a Quotation within your Source:

If your source quotes another source—what MLA calls an “indirect source”—you should make every effort to locate that source and quote it directly. But if you cannot obtain the original, and your source doesn’t provide citation information, you can cite the secondhand source, as long as you clearly indicate what you are doing.

For example, if Friedman quotes another scholar of tattoo art, Walter Sherman, but fails to provide a citation, you could write—

Friedman takes issue with Walter Sherman’s claim that “tattoos efface identity” rather than delineate it (qtd. in Friedman 27).

Citing a Source with No Page Numbers:

If you cite an electronic resource and no page numbers are provided, you must cite the entire source—simply by author or title. If such a source has titled subsections, provide the title of the cited subsection in place of a page number. If your source has numbered paragraphs, you can substitute the paragraph number for a page number: for example, **par. 7**. Finally, if you wish to assist your reader in locating a quotation from a long document lacking page or paragraph numbers, you can count the paragraphs yourself and provide that number in place of a page number—but the MLA does not require such kindness.

For Further Help:

The above examples should correspond to most of the parenthetical documentation you will need. But if you encounter more complicated cases, the complete resource for MLA style is the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (Sixth Edition, 2003). Multiple copies are available behind the Reference Desk of the IC Library: RefDesk LB 2369 .G53 2003. The section you should consult is Chapter 6, “Documentation: Citing Sources in the Text” 237-260.

Or contact—

[Dr. Brian Saunders](#), Humanities Librarian, Ithaca College Library, January 2007