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FYS: The Witness in History

Seeing is Believing:

The Eyewitness Observer in Bartolomé de las Casas' *Destruction of the Indies*

The purpose of this sample paper is simply to demonstrate the format of a short paper for a literature class based upon MLA style. To begin with, let me share a few notes on the manuscript format. Use one-inch margins and an easy to read 12-point font. Include your name, date, and class information in the upper left-hand corner. Include a title, centered above the text, without bold or italics or question marks (unless you are quoting someone). The best titles will grab your reader's attention and convey the main point of the paper. See above for an example.

The text should be double-spaced and left justified, with the first line of paragraphs indented. If you include a quotation of four lines or longer, you should "block indent" the quotation: indent one half inch on the left and right margins. Some ask for single space, some for double space. I will accept either. Here is an example:

Look here. This is what a block-indented quotation looks like. It's at least four lines. Look here. This is what a block-indented quotation

looks like. It's at least four lines. Look here. This is what a block-indented quotation looks like. It's at least four lines. (Casas 4)

If you want to indicate that the lines that follow the block-indented quotation are part of the same paragraph, you should not indent the text after the quotation.

When should you use a citation? You should use citations (in whatever form) to identify the source of direct quotations, examples, paraphrases, or ideas. As you can see, citations can do a lot of different kinds of work, but the most essential is this: they take your reader directly to the sources you are using.

There are a handful of different citation forms. Typically, they vary by discipline. Historians commonly use the documentation style of the *Chicago Manual of Style* from University of Chicago. Psychologists and sociologists prefer APA style. Papers for literature and humanities courses typically make use of the Modern Language Association (MLA) style. For a nice overview of MLA style, see Diana Hacker's *A Writer's Reference*.

In MLA style, the writer uses a parenthetical citation in the text when paraphrasing, quoting, or drawing upon another author's work. The parentheses include the page number (if the author is obvious) or the author's name and page number (if it is not). The reference comes before the period (Hacker 151). There are a host of rules addressing common usage with multiple authors, sources without page numbers, etc. For these you should look to Diana Hacker, once again.

A paper in MLA style should include a works cited page that includes the full details on the works referenced in the text. This list is alphabetized by last name. It

should be double-spaced. The first line of each source is not indented; following lines are. There are elaborate rules as to how you should list particular kinds of works (books, articles, websites, etc.). For these you should consult Diana Hacker.

Note that you *can* use footnotes with MLA style. Indeed, they are often very helpful. Footnotes can be used for informational notes that include comments on sources or tangential remarks that might interrupt the flow of the paper.¹

What else can I add on the mundane requirements of formatting? A few further mechanical points. You should include your name and the page number in the upper right-hand corner of each page. Staple your pages together. Feel free to print your papers double sided. You may use either italics or underlining in your paper, but not both. Underline or italicize the titles of books. Put the titles of articles in quotation marks.

As for the writing, I might just point to a few common issues. Avoid the “I” in analytic papers (though you can certainly make use of the first person in personal essays). Do not use contractions in formal papers; thus, you should never write “it’s” (the contraction of “it is”) in a college paper. Use the full name of persons on your first reference. Include, in parentheses, the date of primary sources and films the first time that you refer to them.

I have much more to say about the minutiae of formatting. I have lectured elsewhere on: “The Semicolon: Poster Child for Abused Punctuation Marks”;

¹ Al Franken delivers a brilliant send-up of the ways that popular authors use footnotes to give their work false authority (12-16).

“Sticklers Unite!—A Hyphen is Not a Dash”; “Behind Every Good Paper is a Good Outline”; “How to Use the ‘I’ in History Without Getting Personal”; “It Would Be Much Easier To Write This Paper If I Knew What I Wanted To Say.” And much, much more.

Works Cited

- Casas, Bartolomé de las. *An Account, Much Abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies*. Ed. and intr. Franklin W. Knight. Trans. Andrew Hurley. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003.
- Franken, Al. *Lies (and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them)*. New York: Dutton, 2003.
- Hacker, Diana. *A Pocket Style Manual 5e with 2009 MLA Update*. Fifth Edition. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009.
- Hacker, Diana. *Research and Documentation Online*. Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009. Web. 15 September, 2009.