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An Essay on Standard Manuscript Format

Whether the writing consists of a company report or an article or book that will be evaluated and screened for publication, a very high percentage of college graduates will produce documents have to be handled by several other people, including a copy editor and the printer. This complex and exacting process requires writers to be diligent about how a document looks and how it is formatted—not merely for aesthetic reasons but because if will directly affect the editing and publishing process.

Examine this page closely. Note that the author's name appears in the upper **left** hand corner, single spaced, above an address and an email address. This assures that if your printed document is lost, it can be returned to you, or if the file strays it can be forwarded electronically to you. Notice that everyone else is double spaced, without exception, and that nothing at all appears in the upper right hand corner of the first page. Note also that the title is not marked in any way: no bold face, no different font, and is centered. The right textual margin is ragged, not right-justified.

The reasons are simple but compelling. The area at the upper right is reserved for editorial instructions, either to you as the author, or to the typesetter or printer. The spacing between words and lines should be uniform throughout. In current document handling systems, your writing will probably be scanned optically or converted by typesetting software—which may be different from the program you used to produce the

document. Optical scanners respond exactly to the visual properties of your page. If you change line spacing, fonts, or leading between lines, the OCR software will insert into the file a very long and irrelevant string of formatting marks, section breaks, style descriptions, and so on. This increases errors and multiplies costs. The same is true if your computer file is to be converted to an in-house typesetting system. It is critical to use standard software in your document—which means, in effect, Microsoft Word or "Rich Text Format" (RTF), without exception. Keeping the format simple and clean greatly reduces the technical editing that must be done to get your document into print. For the same reason, do not put a cover page on papers you produce. The editor wants to read what you write, not turn a useless page to find the beginning. So too, avoid goofy fonts, nifty printed dingbats, clever little pictures, and all other such visual detritus.

Above all, do not try to make your manuscript page look like something in a book. It is going first to an editor, not the general public, who will pass it on to the printer. Roughly 90% of editors (being human) are right handed, so the placement of your name on the first page and the headers all subsequent pages corresponds to how your printed document will actually be handled. In some circumstances, you may be instructed by the editor to use an in-house "style sheet," but that is one more reason to start from clean manuscript format, so that everything you have entered is consistent. In such cases, you are your own editor: you don't want to realize an hour before the deadline that nothing in your document is consistent and the format is all messed up.

For many inexperienced writers, the question of footnoting or documentation becomes a source of misplaced worry. There are two general formats for documentation: the use of footnotes and the use of a works cited (or bibliography) section. In the first,

when you quote material from another source, such as these lines by William Blake,
"How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way, / Is an immense world of
delight, clos'd by your senses five?"[1] the footnote appears at the very end of the quoted
material, and the body of the footnote goes on the page below it. Note particularly that
you must NOT insert the footnotes at the bottom of the page manually. All contemporary
word processing software has an automatic, built-in feature that will insert the footnotes
on the appropriate page in the right *relative* position, and allows changing between
footnotes and endnotes or numbering styles, with just a few keystrokes. The main reason
to avoid manually inserting footnotes is that if an editor changes your text, the footnotes
will not be connected to the *page* where the citation appears, but at the exact line where
you originally inserted it.

If you were to use a works cited model instead of footnotes, you would insert this
instead [Blake 1965, 35] after the end of the quotation. At the end of your document,
under Works Cited, you would list all your sources by Author's name and date of
publication. In either system, the same bibliographic information is required: Author,
Editor if any, Title, Place, Publisher and date. It generally does not matter which system
you use, so long as you are consistent and you provide your reader with exact information
that will allow your work to be checked for accuracy and plausibility.

In either system, the rule of reasonableness is that you should make it easy for
your reader unambiguously to identify the source from which you quoted. Your own
practice should be as simple and consistent as possible. In all systems, the titles of books
are either <u>underlined</u> or *italicized*. (MLA Style now uses *only* italics.) Essays, chapters in

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[1] William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, included in *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*,
ed. by David V. Erdman (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1965), p. 35. All subsequent
references to Blake are to this edition and will be incorporated into the text in parentheses.

books, or poems are placed in "quotation marks." Whatever system you follow, do not proliferate useless footnotes, even when you want to relegate part of your argument to a note so as not to break the flow of the main text. In the example above, the footnote informs the reader that future references will be incorporated in the text, and therefore the essay does not require more footnotes. Thus, if I quoted Blake from the same text, "Exuberance is Beauty" (37) no one will be confused, and there is no need for another footnote.[2] For many of the academic papers you write, if you quote only from one source, one footnote may suffice.

In every case, if you do not make it possible for your reader to check your sources, you are asking for *serious* trouble, including accusations of carelessness, distortion, dishonesty, or worse. Without full bibliographic information, the reader cannot be sure of finding what you quote exactly where you say it is. A secondary reason for paying attention to this is that it requires you to go back and check yourself. *NEVER* rely on your memory alone, and always view your notes with healthy suspicion.

You will observe that the specifications outlined here are vastly simpler than all the exceptions, weird cases, and cautions that you will find in such handbooks as *The MLA Handbook* or *The Chicago Manual of Style*. There is no need to get stupefied over where to put a period. What is exemplified here is a general format for documents that will handle almost all of the writing you will ever have to do that someone else has to read. That includes instructors who are going to comment on and grade your papers. Unless you are given a specific format to follow, use the manuscript format outlined here.

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[2] Now suppose that your eye has traveled all the way down here, and you find only a Latinism, *Ibid*.—or *op. cit*. 37. Don't do it. Document your sources clearly and intelligently: there is no compelling reason to assume that your reader or editor is brain dead--even though experience at times may lead you to wonder.

Don't complicate the appearance of the page: make your *thought* more subtle, more complex, more precise. The visible page itself should be uncluttered and clean.