



## Description

[Manuscript formatting](#) and citation errors are a frequent cause of avoidable delays during [journal submission](#). Editors and author guidelines commonly flag incorrect citation style or noncompliance with manuscript layout as reasons for desk returns, and the problem intensifies when researchers are asked to use a style they seldom encounter in their training. This article explains why MLA style poses particular difficulties for researchers from non-humanities fields, highlights specific MLA nuances (including how to cite materials in digital archives), and offers practical, discipline-agnostic solutions to reduce formatting friction before submission. The following sections describe the core differences, common mistakes, and clear steps researchers can implement immediately to improve compliance and reduce revision time.

## Why It's Important for STEM Researchers to Understand MLA

Although MLA style is predominantly used in humanities research, STEM researchers might still be asked to follow MLA guidelines in interdisciplinary or humanities-related work. For example, when submitting articles that discuss the sociological impact of technology, public health studies, or historical aspects of scientific developments, researchers may encounter MLA formatting requirements. Additionally, when engaging in projects that bridge the gap between STEM and the humanities such as science communication or the ethics of emerging technologies MLA may be preferred to align with humanities conventions. Understanding MLA ensures that researchers avoid delays and formatting errors when submitting work to journals with a humanities focus or interdisciplinary guidelines.

## Why MLA Feels Unfamiliar to Many Non-Humanities Researchers

MLA's circulation is strongest in the humanities, where its *author-page* in-text citation system and its emphasis on the "works-cited" container model are standard practice. The most recent official handbook material that codifies these conventions appears in the ninth edition of the MLA Handbook (2021), and the MLA Style Center provides detailed online guidance that supplements the handbook. Researchers trained primarily in STEM or clinical disciplines are more likely to use styles such as APA, AMA, IEEE, or Vancouver, which emphasize author-date or numbered citation systems; these conventions condition expectations about when and how to include dates, DOIs, or page numbers.

Consequently, switching to MLA requires learning both a new in-text logic and a different way to construct full citations.

## Core MLA Features That Commonly Trip Up Non-Humanities Authors

- **Author-page in-text citations:** MLA's basic in-text citation typically places the author's last name and a page or location marker in parentheses (for example, (Smith 42)). In contrast to author-date styles, the bibliographic year is not part of the parenthetical citation, and page numbers are required when available. For sources without page numbers, MLA allows omission of a locator or the use of an alternate locator (paragraph, chapter, line, timestamp). This difference can lead to misplaced dates or omitted page markers when authors default to their habitual style.
- **The container model for works cited:** MLA frames each citation as a sequence of *core elements* (author; title of source; title of container; other contributors; version; number; publisher; publication date; location). This "core elements" approach allows flexibility but requires attention to which element becomes the signal element for the in-text citation. Researchers unfamiliar with the container model may omit the container (for example, a database or website) or misorder elements, producing a works-cited entry that does not map clearly to the [in-text cue](#).
- **Title page and header conventions:** Many journals in the sciences expect structured title pages and metadata fields; MLA conventionally omits a separate title page for student essays and instead places a short heading and running header format on the first page. This mismatch creates uncertainty about where to place author metadata and whether to include structured journal elements on the manuscript itself. Researchers should always follow the journal's author instructions first, but when MLA format is explicitly requested, the MLA-style layout rules apply.

## Why Digital Archives and Other Special Sources Are Particularly Tricky Under MLA

Digital archives illustrate how MLA's flexibility can create uncertainty. Digitized archival items often lack formal titles, unique persistent identifiers (DOIs), or discrete page numbers; items may be embedded in viewers, accessed through query pages, or displayed without a stable, single URL. MLA's published guidance recommends treating each archival item as an individual work and using descriptive titles or item numbers when formal titles are absent, listing the archive or repository as a container, and supplying location information (collection name, box/folder, item number) so other researchers can trace the source. The [MLA Style Center's](#) "Citing artifacts in a digital archive" post gives concrete examples showing when to use item numbers, how to name containers, and when to include a URL. When researchers apply citation rules from their familiar style (e.g., always include DOI or always use author-date parentheticals), they risk creating ambiguous in-text cues or works-cited entries that do not lead back to the primary source.

## Common Mistakes Observed Among Non-Humanities Authors

- Mixing citation logics: inserting year in parenthetical citations or using numeric reference numbering within MLA text.
- Omitting the container or item/location details for archival materials and digitized artifacts, which makes verification difficult.

- Using citation-management exports without checking MLA 9 templates many reference managers default to earlier editions or to styles tuned for other disciplines.
- Ignoring MLA's guidance for sources without page numbers and then supplying inconsistent locators across citations.

## Practical How-To Steps for Non-Humanities Researchers

The following checklist is immediately actionable and suitable as a pre-submission control:

1. **Verify the required style and edition:** confirm that the journal wants MLA and which edition (MLA 9 is the version most journals reference if they list MLA).
2. **Build a contrast table:** on one page, list how your familiar style (e.g., APA) handles in-text citations and how MLA differs this simple comparison prevents cross-contamination.
3. **Use the MLA handbook and the MLA Style Center as primary references for corner cases (digital archives, interviews, images).** Bookmark relevant pages for quick checks.
4. **Validate archival citations manually:** when citing digitized archival items, include item identifiers or collection locators and the repository as the container; where unique URLs are absent, add an accession/box/folder description.
5. **Export from a citation manager but then verify each Works Cited entry against MLA examples** do not rely on automation alone. Tools can help, but exports often need manual corrections for complex sources.

## Examples and Short Case Study

A real-world example clarifies the point: a multidisciplinary team preparing an article on historical epidemiology sourced digitized public-health correspondence from multiple state archives. The team initially exported citations from their reference manager and left the default author-date parentheticals in place. During internal review, a historian on the team flagged that the in-text citations omitted item numbers and failed to identify the archival container. After applying MLA's archival guidance adding descriptive titles, collection identifiers, and the archive as the container the manuscript's citations mapped unambiguously to the works-cited list and to the original digital items, facilitating verification for reviewers and editors. Institutional library guides that adapt MLA examples for archives provide useful templates for these entries.

## How Manuscript Preparation Workflows Can Reduce Errors

Instituting a short, repeatable workflow makes compliance manageable for teams that do not use MLA regularly. Recommended steps:

- **Assign a single team member to standardize citations in MLA format at the penultimate draft stage.**
- **Use a two-stage validation:** (a) automated check (citation formatter or manager), (b) manual editorial pass focused on special sources (archives, interviews, images).
- **Maintain a living exemplar works-cited file with annotated examples for recurring complex source types encountered in the project** (e.g., archival scans, museum objects). This reduces the cognitive load on contributors unfamiliar with MLA.

## When to Seek Professional Support

If time constraints, complex archival sources, or unfamiliarity with MLA's subtleties cause bottlenecks, professional services can help streamline submission readiness. Services that offer targeted help [manual formatting checks](#), citation validation against CrossRef and publisher metadata, and subject-aware [manuscript editing](#) can reduce the risk of desk returns and save researcher time. For teams that prefer an in-house approach, combining a [citation-formatter tool](#) with a subject-aware editorial review captures both efficiency and accuracy.

## Conclusion and Next Steps

MLA's flexibility and the humanities' emphasis on contextual bibliographic detail are strengths but they become pitfalls when authors apply habits from other disciplines without adjustment. Non-humanities researchers can close this gap by using the [MLA Style Center](#) and the MLA Handbook as primary references, adopting a short validation workflow, and giving special attention to how digitized archival materials are cited. Implementing the checklist above will reduce formatting friction, improve traceability of sources, and strengthen the manuscript before submission.

For teams that want practical support, consider combining a citation formatter with subject-aware editorial help: Enago's [manuscript editing](#) and [formatting services](#) can help align a manuscript with journal or MLA requirements, and [Trinka's citation formatter](#) can automate validated MLA-9 formatting while flagging incomplete metadata. These services can help reduce desk rejections related to style and citation compliance and free researchers to concentrate on the research itself.

### Category

1. Reporting Research

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