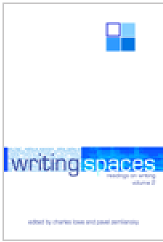

Everything Changes, or Why MLA Isn't (Always) Right

by Janice R. Walker

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Everything Changes, or Why MLA Isn't (Always) Right

Janice R. Walker

"The only thing that doesn't change is the fact that everything changes."* I've heard this saying all my life, but until I wanted to use it for this essay, it never occurred to me to check where it came from. According to Bartleby.com, this pithy saying is attributed to Heraclitus, a Greek philosopher, and should actually read, "Change alone is unchanging." But then Bartleby cites *The Columbia World of Quotations,* edited by Robert Andrews, Mary Biggs, and Michael Seidel, as the source of the information about Heraclitus.

So, now what do I do? Do I change the opening quotation? I like my version better than Heraclitus's (maybe because it's the way I always heard it, right or wrong). Do I cite Heraclitus? Do I cite *Bartleby.com?* Or do I cite *The Columbia World of Quotations?* Or maybe I don't need a citation at all. But then, will I be charged with plagiarism? Of course, if I can argue it's common knowledge, maybe I can get away with leaving it alone?

I'm *so* confused!

When it comes to citation practices, the saying is not only confusing to cite, but apt. Often citing sources for an academic project *is* a bit like trying to hit a moving target: the rules seem to keep changing. What doesn't seem to change, of course, is the need to know where

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information comes from. Otherwise, how do we (both authors and readers) know if the information is reliable? If we don't know or understand the context from which information is gleaned, how do we know what it means? And, of course, failure to cite words, ideas, or information obtained from other sources is considered plagiarism and can have serious repercussions.

So, in the face of so much turmoil and because the issue can have very high stakes, in the classroom and beyond, most of us are, admittedly, confused. While attempting to clear up this confusion may actually complicate it still further, nonetheless, in this article, I explore citation as a rhetorical practice, one which does not always fit precisely within the boundaries of traditional style guides but that nonetheless follows a logic that does make sense and that can be learned.

Citation as a Rhetorical Act

Strict attribution of sources has not always been necessary, and indeed in many cultures and contexts, it is still not (necessarily) required. Ancient texts often did not follow any formal rules of attribution, since it was assumed that the audience would already be familiar with the body of scholarly work. I have also heard (somewhere) that in Chinese culture, the words of others are used without attribution as a way of honoring those whose words were considered so important that they needed no attribution[1]. That is, it would insult the reader to tell him or her where a quotation was from as much as it would insult an author to assume that his or her words would not be recognized by a reader without such attribution.

In most Western cultures, the invention of the printing press is often cited as an important turning point, especially in discussions of citation and intellectual property. For one thing, the printing press allowed for texts to extend in both time and space in ways that oral texts could not. Even the elaborately illuminated and hand-copied-by-monks texts were prohibitively expensive and jealously guarded so that it could safely be assumed that the audience for these works would be limited. However, the printing press (eventually) allowed for cheaper yet supposedly perfect copies, making knowledge—or at least making printed works purporting to be knowledge—more readily available to the general public. And, of course, free public education extended that general reading public to, well, anyone who wanted to take the time

to read a given work. Thus, it could no longer be assumed that readers would be familiar with the body of work referenced by an author.

Even so, we still don't cite every fact, idea, or quotation. So-called common knowledge, we are taught, does not need to be cited. That is, I can write "the world is round" without needing to provide a source to prove the statement. Of course, there was a time when this statement would have been considered heretical and not common knowledge at all! And, quite frankly, it is not technically true that the world is round at all (see http://wiki.answers.com/Q/Is_the_earth_round). Aphorisms, or famous sayings, such as "A rolling stone gathers no moss," or "A stitch in time saves nine," or even "I'll be back!" may also need no attribution. But academic writing is written (or composed) for audiences who expect strict adherence to guidelines for citation. One reason for this is that the persuasiveness of a work depends upon the information the author herself has relied on. Indeed, in some disciplines, citation of sources is a hallmark of credibility:

> Today, a scientific publication is easily recognized by its footnotes, endnotes and references to other scientific articles or books. This is one of the features which make scientific texts so different from a journalist's story or a novel. A scientist seems to be—at least in his [or her] professional life—an annoyingly precise person, whose claims are painstakingly documented. (Wouters 2)

Outside of academia, of course, citation practices aren't always so formal. Newspapers and magazine articles do not usually include a list of works cited or references after all. But they *do* (usually) cite their sources. The Associated Press allows use of anonymous sources only under condition that

1. The material is information and not opinion or speculation, and is vital to the news report.
2. The information is not available except under the conditions of anonymity imposed by the source.
3. The source is reliable, and in a position to have accurate information. (APME)

Of course, not all news organizations are as careful about their use of sources. Nonetheless, even tabloids often attempt to present information in such a way as to appear credible. For example, an article on

UFOs in *The Sun,* a British tabloid known for sensationalist reporting, does identify its source even if the claims presented may be questionable according to scientific standards: "Dr. Yuri Labvin, president of the Tunguska Spatial Phenomenon Foundation, insists an alien spacecraft sacrificed itself to prevent a gigantic meteor from slamming into us above Siberia on June 30, 1908" (Watson). But what does an average reader know about Dr. Labvin's credentials? Would it matter if his doctorate is in UFOlogy from the University of Mars or if, instead, he holds a Ph.D. in Physics from MIT? And what about the foundation over which he presides?[2] What do we know about it? Well, I think you get my point!

A tongue-in-cheek example of the importance of evaluating the possible biases of one's sources can be seen in the movie trailer advertising the 1959 Peter Sellers film, *The Mouse that Roared* (TCM). "Here's what some of the world's keenest and most objective minds have said about *The Mouse that Roared,*" the advertisement proudly exclaims:

> *"Could not be improved upon!"*
>
> —*The Producer*
>
> *"Completely delightful!"*
>
> —*The Director*
>
> *"The title role is exquisitely played!"*
>
> —*The Mouse*

Even if we agree that the Mouse's acting was superb, we probably wouldn't want to cite the Mouse as saying so!

Television commercials and magazine advertisements may include what is often termed *fine print* to qualify the claims they make. One mouthwash claims to be the "#1 Dentist Recommended Brand" but with an asterisked note that modifies the claim: it is the number one brand "among fluoride mouth rinses" (ACT). The ad also includes a note identifying a study to support its claim (and, in the case of this online ad, a link to the study itself). Of course, not all research studies are equal. Publication information is essential to aid scholars in determining the authority of a given source: Where was the study published? Was it a scholarly journal or a book published by a univer-

sity press? If not, did it undergo peer review? Scholarly and professional journals in the field may agree—or not—with the results of such commissioned studies. Thus, it is essential to conduct further research to determine the credibility of such sources before relying on them to make an effective argument. (For more information on evaluating sources, see "Evaluating Sources of Information" at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/553/01/).

Academic writers, in other words, are held to the highest standards of reliability for sources. Thus, academic citation formats include information that will not only help a reader to locate a given source and give credit to others for their work, but that will also help a reader to determine a source's credibility, for example, by identifying authorship and/or publication information. However, just as the printing press made it necessary to develop ways to cite information for unfamiliar readers, the advent of new media has made it necessary to develop new ways to cite them. That is, scholars nowadays may rely equally (or even more) on types of resources that quite simply didn't exist a century—or even a decade—ago.

Traditional Style Guidelines and New Media

Just when word processors finally automated the process of footnoting, the Modern Language Association (MLA) decided that we should cite sources using parenthetic notes instead. And when *Microsoft Word 2007* included an automatic (sort of) bibliography generator, MLA responded by changing its formats so the generator is useless.[3] Of course, bibliography generators generally aren't very good (they are all GIGO—Garbage In, Garbage Out—after all). Nonetheless, it does seem that whenever a technology emerges that can facilitate the process of documenting sources, MLA changes its rules. Now, MLA has decreed that we have to include the medium of publication, even for books and journal articles (the medium for these, by the way, is "print"). For journal articles accessed through library databases, it is no longer necessary to include the library information (which was silly anyway—if you know the name of the database, you can access it from any library that subscribes to it, but you *can't* access a library's resources if you aren't a patron of that library). Instead, MLA now stipulates that one should designate the medium as "Web" for these resources. Technically, of course, library databases aren't on the web

although they are accessed (usually) through a web portal. So, are you confused yet?

To make matters worse, MLA has now decreed that it is no longer necessary to include the Uniform Resource Locator, or URL (the Internet address), for sources that *are* on the web (182). Why? Because many students, teachers, and scholars were trying to type in very long and complex URLs that didn't work anyway, perhaps because they don't understand that many URLs are created dynamically and can't be accessed just by typing them into a browser. In other words, because many people did not seem to be able to figure out how to cite Internet sources, many styles have all but given up. Hey, you can just Google it, right? [4] The American Psychological Association (APA)[5] now contends that, if a scholar has reason to believe that a given source accessed online is the "same" as the printed version, then perhaps citing the print source instead of the version actually consulted might be okay (271). In case you can't tell, I disagree that URLs should be omitted from these entries.

Moreover, if a source happens to be in some format other than "print" or HTML (that is, "Web"), the medium gets, well, even more complicated. MLA now requires that we designate the medium for *all* sources—web, print, *Microsoft Word* document, JPEG, television, radio, DVD, CD, PDF, and so on. In other words, we have to know a lot of things about a given source that most of us don't know—and, quite frankly, usually don't need to know:

> An important feature of electronic files is that they are readily transferable from one medium to another: files may be downloaded from their online homes and saved to disks; CD-ROM titles may be installed on a user's hard drive; and most formats may be printed out. For this reason, identifying the publication medium in the bibliographic reference may be meaningless. It certainly violates the principle of economy in that the protocol or publication information is usually sufficient to locate the source. (Walker and Taylor 57)

Our computers usually know how to handle files—regardless of publication media—from the file extension (the letters after the "dot" in a file name) regardless of whether a given file is online, downloaded to a hard drive or diskette, included on a CD-ROM, or whatever. I do not need to tell my computer what program to use to open a file as long as

I have the software to open it. Of course, if my computer doesn't have the software installed, then, yes, I may need to do some research to find out the type of file and what software to use to open it—but even this process is often automated (try opening a file that your computer doesn't recognize; most operating systems and browsers will offer to search the web for the application for you, for good or ill).

Oh, yeah, and now MLA has (finally) decided to allow students and scholars to use italics instead of underlining. Actually, that isn't quite accurate: MLA always allowed this use, but few people seemed aware that MLA stipulated that underlining indicated text that should be italicized (Gibaldi 94). Now, finally, it's clear that it is okay to use italics to indicate text that should be italicized (MLA 78) and there should be only one space after a period, not two (77).

If you're beginning to think that citation styles are just too complicated, you may be right. However, they don't have to be. There really is a logic to citing sources, whether they are online, in print, or in some other medium, now extant or yet to be developed.

The Logic of Citation

In *The Columbia Guide to Online Style, citation* is defined as "the practice of systematically indicating the origins and thoughts, ideas, knowledge, or words that one uses to author a report, essay, article, speech, book, website, or other work" (Walker and Taylor 29). *The Columbia Guide,* thus, takes a rhetorical approach, including an entire section on the logic of citation, based on the following five principles: access, intellectual property, economy, standardization, and transparency (Walker and Taylor 31).

The *principle of access* is satisfied by providing sufficient information to allow interested readers to locate the sources of information upon which a writer has relied. That information includes the elements of citation discussed in the next section, including author, title, and publication information. The *principle of intellectual property* ensures that proper credit is given for the work of others (hence, avoiding plagiarism), as well as ensuring that a writer's reliance on another's work is not so extensive that it is detrimental to that others' property rights. (For more information on intellectual property in the classroom see http://personal.georgiasouthern.edu/~jwalker/ip/ipdummie.html). The *principle of economy* simply means that citations should pro-

vide all of the necessary information in as economical a form as possible, that is, by using a readily recognizable format or code rather than having to stipulate every aspect of a citation. Imagine how obnoxious it would be to read the following:

> The quotation I included in the first paragraph following the sub-heading on page 9 of this essay, wherein I defined "citation" as "the practice of systematically indicating the origins and thoughts, ideas, knowledge, or words that one uses to author a report, essay, article, speech, book, Web site, or other work" is from page 29 of the 2nd edition of *The Columbia Guide to Online Style,* a book written by Janice R. Walker and Todd Taylor, and published in the year 2006 by Columbia University Press, which is located in New York City.

Compare this to the brief parenthetic note inserted in the text which merely lists the authors' last names and the page number (i.e., Walker and Taylor 29). The *principle of standardization* ensures that those readers and scholars within any given discipline will recognize this note as providing important information. In this case, the readers will know to look in the alphabetical list of Works Cited, usually at the end of the essay, under "W" to locate the source authored by Walker and Taylor. Then, if the reader is so inclined, he or she may choose to locate the book in a library or bookstore, and turn to page 29 to check the quotation or to obtain more information. The parenthetic note also helps fulfill the *principle of transparency,* ensuring that the citation is as unobtrusive as possible so as not to interfere with the writer's presentation of his or her own ideas while still providing all of the necessary information.

Like most styles, MLA style is designed to fulfill the needs of a specific discipline. It is thus often difficult to force one style to fit the needs of work in other disciplines. That is, following MLA style to cite work in the hard sciences may be just as awkward as attempting to cite work in languages and literature following IEEE style, which is designed for the needs of those working in electrical and electronic engineering fields. Different disciplines may use slightly different arrangements of the elements of citation in order to facilitate communication of important information. For instance, disciplines in the humanities (MLA and Chicago styles, for instance) often focus on the author; scientific disciplines (for example, APA or the Council of Sci-

ence Editors) follow what is known as an author-date format. Thus, elements need to be arranged in such a way as to be readily understood and recognized by members of the discipline for or in which one is writing. While most high school and first year college composition classes require students to adhere to MLA format, students will usually find that other styles are required in courses in their majors. And, of course, electronic or electronically accessed sources have further complicated the situation.

Luckily, by using an element approach and understanding the elements of a citation, it is possible to then fit the elements into the various codes that you may be tasked with following. The standard elements of most citations are those elements that will aid a reasonably knowledgeable person to locate the source and help in determining its credibility for a particular context (in our case, a scholarly one). Thus, regardless of which style you choose or are directed to follow—and regardless of how many iterations or changes the styles undergo—noting these elements will ensure that you will be able to adequately cite your work.

- *Author information.* Usually, this is the person or persons primarily responsible for a given work, but this could also include performers, producers, or directors (for plays or films); artists or composers (for works of art or music); editors (for edited collections); and/or corporate, group, or organizational authors (for work-for-hire, government agencies, or unsigned news articles, for example). Don't be too quick to assume that an unsigned article or web page has no author. While this will occasionally be true (in which case, your bibliographic entry will begin with the title of the article rather than an author's name), more often the piece is considered "authored" by the group or organization that sponsored it.
- *Title information.* Generally, an article title is enclosed in quotation marks, and preceded by the name(s) of the author(s); if the article is included in a larger work (for instance, a newspaper or magazine or an edited anthology), you will also need to note the title of the larger work (in italics), and include the name(s) of the editor(s) of the collection, if applicable. Title information for online sources is often confusing, especially for personal web pages or sites. A blog entry may have a title

(if so, enclose it in quotation marks) that is different from the title of the blog itself (formatted in italics). A web page may have a title at the top of the page—and a different title in the title bar (the bar, usually blue, at the very top of your browser or application that provides information about the file you are accessing). Sometimes, an online file will not have a title in any traditional sense, in which case you may choose to include the file name (for instance, kitten.jpg for a graphic file) in place of a title. Title information can be very confusing; remember that the purpose is to help a reasonable person locate the same information you are citing by providing the most explicit information possible.

- *Edition and/or version information.* Include information noting 2nd or subsequent editions or revisions of a book or application, since the information they contain may have changed substantially from previous editions. For web pages and sites, the only information you may be able to locate is a "Last modified" date. Again, remember your purpose: to aid your reader in locating the *same* information you have relied on in your work, if possible.
- *Publication information.* This includes the name of the publisher, place of publication, and date of publication (for most books), or title of journal or other periodical, including volume and issue numbers (if applicable), or online publication information, such as a URL (regardless of what MLA says). You may need to omit the URL from your list of Works Cited or References if your teacher requires strict adherence to MLA or APA guidelines, but having the information will still help if you need to verify information—and many teachers will prefer you include it, regardless of the style you are following.
- *Access information.* For information contained in online data bases, in addition to noting the name of the database, note any file numbers, search terms, or other information that will help your reader locate the source. For library databases, these may include DOI (Digital Object Identifier), ISSN (International Standard Serial Number), or AN (Accession Number); reference librarians are especially knowledgeable about how to use this information to locate sources. In the case of information published online that might change frequently and/or without

> notice, such as personal web pages, blogs, or other such sites, include the date you last accessed the source as well as the date of publication or last revision, if available. Some online sites may provide a URL that offers direct access to a file (a single web page or YouTube video for instance). If the URL is especially long and difficult, however, you may be able to include a URL to the main page (say, to the YouTube home page, for instance) so long as you have provided sufficient information (author, title, date, search terms, or whatever) to allow your reader to locate the specific file or source from that main page.

While some instructors frown on the use of bibliography generators, they may be useful in helping you keep track of information. The real challenge in using them, of course, is the same as the challenge for students using *The MLA Handbook* (or any other style manual, for that matter): you must first determine the type of source you are citing in order to determine the necessary elements to cite it. That is, citing a book is different from citing a web page, which is different from citing a YouTube video, which is different from citing a journal article accessed through an online database . . .

Keeping track of information can be difficult. And it can be difficult to locate the elements you need to keep track of in the first place. However, doing so ensures that you can adequately give credit where it is due, and can save you hours of time if you need to re-locate important information yourself—and, of course, adequately citing your work can help make your own work more credible and persuasive. Luckily, once you understand how the various elements of a citation work, you are well on your way.

In the Works Cited list that follows, I have chosen to follow the formats included in the 6th edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* rather than include the (silly) information about the medium of publication that the new edition requires, and I have followed the 2nd edition of *The Columbia Guide to Online Style* for electronic or electronically accessed sources (that is, if the editors of this collection let me get away with doing so!). You may have to follow the requirements of teachers, editors, or others in positions to make these choices for you. Hopefully, this essay has given you some insight into how these choices are made—and how you can work with them if need be! By the way, if you're wondering how I finally chose to cite

my opening quotation, do what scholars do: check the list of Works Cited! [6,7]

Notes

1. Lise Buranen presented information that questions this “lore” (as Stephen North, in *The Making of Composition,* terms such knowledge claims) in “But I *Wasn’t* Cheating: Plagiarism and Cross-Cultural Mythology” (*Perspectives on Plagiarism and Intellectual Property in a Postmodern World,* ed. Lise Buranen and Alice M. Roy, Albany: SUNY, 1999, pp. 63–74). In her study of Eastern versus Western views of what constitutes plagiarism, responses to questionnaires showed “no basic difference between what they had been taught in their home country and in this country” (68). However, in a personal interview, at least one of her colleagues believed that it might be true that “since the ‘acknowledgment’ of the source is in the very use of it, listing them [sic] in a bibliography is at best redundant and at worst an insult to a reader’s intelligence” (69). Nonetheless, the respondent also argued that “One still credits one’s sources, but what is different is the form in which that ‘credit’ is given, whether explicit or implied” (69). It was noted, however, that Chinese culture does seem to be moving to a more explicit, e.g., Western, style of citation (69).

2. I conducted a quick Google search for Dr. Labvin and the Tuguska Spatial Phenomenon Foundation and was unable to discover any information about either beyond references to the *Sun* article. Obviously, in order to rely on the claims made in this article, a scholar would need to conduct further research to determine how credible a source he is.

3. I do not mean to imply a cause-and-effect relationship here. There is no conspiracy. More likely, MLA and the developers of new word processing technologies were working independently of each other to solve the same problems and perhaps ended up working at cross purposes.

4. The *MLA Handbook* argues that “Readers are now more likely to find resources on the Web by searching for titles and authors’ names than by typing URLs” (182).

5. As I write this, the American Psychological Association has released its new 6th edition. Based on, admittedly, a very quick perusal, it appears that, now that MLA no longer requires inclusion of URLs, APA does, along with strongly recommending inclusion of the DOI (a more stable identifying feature than the URL).

6. In this case, I chose to cite the source I actually used, *Bartleby.com,* rather than the source Bartleby cites. I also chose to include the direct URL since it’s short and will take the reader directly to the information I used. I could also have chosen to cite the URL for Bartleby’s home page, where users can search for the information, perhaps including the search term(s) or

path(s) in my citation. In other words, there is no one right answer for how to cite many of the sources that scholars may reference. The key, of course, is to provide sufficient information for a reasonable and informed reader to re-locate the same source of information. (NOTE AGAIN—even this may not always be possible. Sometimes sites move or disappear, and even books sometimes go out of print. Online there's the "wayback" machine, Google sometimes offers cached copies or online sites, and Amazon.com can often help readers locate even difficult-to-find and out-of-print books.) Are we having fun yet?

7. Thanks to the editors of this collection, Pavel Zemliansky and Charles Lowe, as well as to Jim Kalmbach and Douglas Eyman whose thoughtful and insightful critiques were so helpful in revising and completing this work.

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