The \texttt{mla} class\textsuperscript{*}

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Abstract

In the United States, secondary and undergraduate students are generally expected to adhere to the format prescribed by the Modern Language Association (MLA) for typewritten essays, research papers and writings. Sadly, the tool of choice is usually Microsoft Word, even amongst those fluent with \TeX. Though there are some templates and tools to aid in writing in the MLA format using \LaTeX, none fully met the expectations of the author. So voilà, there now exists an \texttt{mla.cls} proper: a simple, straightforward class for composing papers almost perfectly adherent to the MLA style guide\textsuperscript{1}.

Licensing

The files contained in this package may be distributed and/or modified under the conditions of the \LaTeX\ Project Public License (LPPL), either version 1.3 of this license or any later version. The latest version of this license is in \url{https://www.latex-project.org/lppl/lppl-1-3c/}, and version 1.3c or later is part of all distributions of \LaTeX\ version 2008/05/04 or later.

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\textsuperscript{*}This document corresponds to \texttt{mla v0.8}, dated 2020/08/16.

1 Initial code

The mla class uses the article class as its base. Thanks to this, macros such as \textit or \textsuperscript work as expected and won’t have to be re-defined.

1 \LoadClass[letterpaper,12pt]{article}

\mladate

The Handbook requires use of the \textit{day month year} date format, not \TeX’s standard \textit{month day, year}. The macro \texttt{\mladate} will format \today accordingly to be used as the default value for \texttt{\date} (see section 5.1).

2 \newcommand{\mladate}{% 
3 \the\day\n
\ifcase\the\month
4 \or January
5 \or February
6 \or March
7 \or April
8 \or May
9 \or June
10 \or July
11 \or August
12 \or September
13 \or October
14 \or November
The following are true/false switches to toggle certain features.

\MLA@seven \MLA@eight \MLA@eightalt \MLA@microtype

2 Options

Some teachers and professors might still require using the seventh edition of the Handbook, while others will likely use the eighth edition. Which edition to implement can be explicitly specified with the mla7 and mla8 class options. The only difference this makes within the mla class itself is the citation format used by biblatex.

\DeclareOption{mla7}{\MLA@seventrue\MLA@eightfalse\MLA@eightaltfalse}
\DeclareOption{mla8}{\MLA@sevenfalse\MLA@eighttrue\MLA@eightaltfalse}

Some versions of biblatex-mla might not recognize the style=mla-new option for the eighth edition. In this case, one can specify mla8alt to the mla class.
\DeclareOption{mla8alt}{\MLA@sevenfalse\MLA@eightfalse\MLA@eightalttrue}

The microtype package can be optionally included with the microtype option to offset the pain of using the Times typeface.
\DeclareOption{microtype}{\MLA@microtypetrue}

2.1 Processing

A friendly warning will be provided when an unknown option is provided.
\DeclareOption*{%
  \ClassWarning{mla}{Unknown option \CurrentOption; ignoring}
}

By default, the eighth edition of the Handbook is used. To future-proof your documents for upcoming editions, however, it may be wise to explicitly specify mla8.
\ExecuteOptions{mla8}
\ProcessOptions\relax

3 Loading packages

The mla class requires the following packages:\footnote{All of the required packages are available for download on the Comprehensive \TeX\ Archive Network (CTAN) if unavailable on your system: https://www.ctan.org/}:
\RequirePackage{caption}
\RequirePackage{enotez}
\RequirePackage{enumitem}
\RequirePackage{fancyhdr}
\RequirePackage{float}
\RequirePackage{fullpage}
\RequirePackage{graphicx}
\RequirePackage{ragged2e}
\RequirePackage{newtxtext}
\RequirePackage{titlesec}
\RequirePackage{xstring}

The following consists of prerequisites for \texttt{biblatex-mla}:
\RequirePackage[american]{babel}
\RequirePackage{csquotes}
\RequirePackage{hanging}

And finally, \texttt{biblatex}. The \texttt{mla} class options dictate what options are passed to \texttt{biblatex}, hence the \texttt{if-then} clauses.
\ifMLA@seven
\RequirePackage[style=mla,noremoteinfo=false,showmedium=true,
backend=biber]{biblatex}
\fi
\ifMLA@eight
\RequirePackage[style=mla-new,noremoteinfo=false,
showmedium=false,backend=biber]{biblatex}
\fi
\ifMLA@eightalt
\RequirePackage[style=mla,noremoteinfo=false,
showmedium=false,backend=biber]{biblatex}
\fi

The \texttt{microtype} package is loaded if the \texttt{microtype} option is specified.
\ifMLA@microtype
\RequirePackage{microtype}
\fi

For some reason, common practice is to load \texttt{hyperref} last of all packages.
\RequirePackage{hyperref}
\hypersetup{hidelinks,pdfusetitle}

4 Document layout

4.1 Font

The \texttt{newtxtext} package was already loaded in section 3, and the font was set to 12pt when loading the \texttt{article} class in section 1. This should be metric-compatible
with the infamous Times New Roman, the *de facto* standard of the MLA format\(^1\).

4.1.1 Microtype

The `microtype` package (if loaded as in section 3) will marginally offset the burden of using Times by correcting its ugly kerning and tracking. The vague `activate=false` below simply disables protrusion, maintaining original line and page breaks.

```
4.2 Line breaking and spacing

The *Handbook* prescribes exact double-spacing, the definition of which varies between typesetters. With these parameters exact, \LaTeX\ produces 23 lines of text whereas the “industry standard” Microsoft Word\(^2\) produces 24. To compensate, line spacing is set to *just enough*:

```
4.3 Paragraphing

The *Handbook* specifies half-inch first-line indentation for every paragraph and no extra spacing in between.

```
\footnote{1 According to the popular, oft-referenced Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL): https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/mla_general_format.html.}
\footnote{2 Microsoft Word 97 through 2016, and likely following versions as well.}

```
```
For a final heinous crime against typesetting, the *Handbook* advises flush-left/ragged-right alignment. (This is acheived with the `ragged2e` package.)

\begin{RaggedRight}

noindent

The `noindent` environment doesn’t work as expected in conjunction with `ragged2e`, hence the re-definition.

\begin{verbatim}
\makeatletter
\renewenvironment{noindent}{% 
  \edef\tmpind{\parindent}
  \setlength{\parindent}{0pt}
}{% 
  \setlength{\parindent}{\tmpind}
  \undef{\tmpind}
}
\makeatother
\end{verbatim}

\subsection{Page layout}

With few exceptions, the US uses “letter-size” paper. The paper size was already set when loading the `article` class in section 1.

Furthermore, the *Handbook* dictates uniform one-inch margins on said paper. This was already set by the `fullpage` package as loaded in section 3. The `\textheight` and `\textwidth` definitions are here just for good measure.

\begin{verbatim}
\setlength{\textheight}{9in}
\setlength{\textwidth}{6.5in}
\end{verbatim}

\subsection{Running head}

The running head in MLA style is simply the author’s surname followed by the current page number, right-aligned. This is managed using the `fancyhdr` and `xstring` packages.

\begin{verbatim}
\fancypagestyle{norule}{% 
  \renewcommand{\headrulewidth}{0pt}
  \renewcommand{\footrulewidth}{0pt}
}%
\fancyhf{}
\pagestyle{headings}
\pagestyle{norule}
\fancyhead[RO]{\StrBehind{\@author}{ }\[\last\]last \thepage}
\end{verbatim}

The following code is largely a hack to align the header in the middle of the one-inch margin above the body text.

\begin{verbatim}
\setlength{\headheight}{18pt}
\setlength{\headsep}{12pt}
\setlength{\voffset}{-34pt}
\end{verbatim}
5 Document markup

5.1 The header

\title\author\date The \title, \author and \date macros work as expected. However, if your surname contains a space, you must contain the surname in braces as such: \author{Ludwig \{van Beethoven\}}. This keeps the full surname in the running head (see section 4.5).

The following header commands are unique to the mlad class.

\professor The instructor who assigned the paper, i.e. “Dr. Marjorie Stewart”.

\course The course for which this paper was assigned, i.e. “ENGL 101-02”.

To prevent undefined behavior, the internal macros used to store the above information are set empty, except for \date. (Note the use of \mladate; see section 1.)

\makemlaheader This command finally prints out the standard four-line MLA header, as well as the title.

For simplicity’s sake, \maketitle is directly aliased to \makemlaheader.

Finally, the header will print at the beginning of every document.
5.2 Sectioning

Section headings are neither defined nor discouraged in the Handbook, though commonly used in longer papers. Customary section headings are rather straightforward, consisting of the section number in Arabic numerals, a space, and the section name with no special decoration\(^1\).

However, for the sake of clarity, the section headings in this class will be set in small-caps.

\begin{verbatim}
\renewcommand{\thesection}{\@arabic\c@section}
\renewcommand{\thesubsection}{\thesection.\@arabic\c@subsection}
\renewcommand{\thesubsubsection}{\thesubsection.\@arabic\c@subsubsection}
\end{verbatim}

Un-fancifying the headings is achieved using the titlesec package.

\begin{verbatim}
\titleformat{\section}{block}{\normalsize\sc}{\thetitle.\enspace}{0pt}{}
\titleformat{\subsection}{block}{\normalsize\sc}{\thetitle.\enspace}{0pt}{}
\titleformat{\subsubsection}{block}{\normalsize\sc}{\thetitle.\enspace}{0pt}{}
\titlespacing*{\section}{0pt}{0pt}{0pt}
\titlespacing*{\subsection}{0pt}{0pt}{0pt}
\titlespacing*{\subsubsection}{0pt}{0pt}{0pt}
\titlelabel{}
\patchcmd{\ttl@select}{\strut}{}{}{}
\patchcmd{\ttlh@hang}{\strut}{}{}{}
\end{verbatim}

5.3 Lists

To the user, itemize and enumerate lists will function exactly as expected. However, the formatting of the lists must be modified as to preserve double-spacing and adhere to common practice\(^2\); these changes are achieved using the enumitem package.

\begin{verbatim}
\setlist[itemize]{parsep=0pt, itemsep=0pt, topsep=0pt, leftmargin=\parindent}
\setlist[enumerate]{parsep=0pt, itemsep=0pt, topsep=0pt, leftmargin=\parindent}
\end{verbatim}

\(^1\)According to the popular, oft-referenced OWL: https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/mla_general_format.html.

\(^2\)According to the MLA itself: https://style.mla.org/vertical-lists-in-mla-style/.
5.4 Block quotation

The Handbook dictates blockquotes be set flush a half-inch from the left margin with no extra space on the right. The existing \texttt{blockquote} environment is re-defined for this purpose.

\begin{verbatim}
\renewenvironment{blockquote}{% 
  \list{}{\leftmargin 0.5in} 
  \item[] 
  \setlength{\parindent}{0.5in} 
  \vspace{-\topsep} 
}{% 
  \endlist 
  \vspace{-\topsep} }
\end{verbatim}

5.5 Figures and tables

The Handbook doesn’t specify much of anything about the actual formatting of figures or tables or their captions, so the following is mostly based on the package author’s personal preference and observations.

\begin{verbatim}
\setlength{\floatsep}{\baselineskip} 
\setlength{\intextsep}{\baselineskip} 
\setlength{\textfloatsep}{\baselineskip}
\g@addto@macro\@floatboxreset\centering
\end{verbatim}

Thanks to a bug inherited from the here package which has remained unfixed since 1987\textsuperscript{1}, there is not only extra space after the figure but the inability to insert a figure within a paragraph. Miraculously, there is a fix for this\textsuperscript{2}.

\begin{verbatim}
\renewcommand{\float@endH}{% 
  \vspace{-12pt} 
  \@endfloatbox\vskip\intextsep 
  \if@flstyle\setbox\@currbox\float@makebox\columnwidth\fi 
  \box\@currbox\vskip\intextsep\relax\@doendpe
}{% 
\captionsetup{font={normalfont}, 
labelformat=simple, 
labelsep=period, 
position=bottom, 
aboveskip=6pt, 
belowskip=-10pt}
\end{verbatim}

Un-fancifying the caption is acheived using the \texttt{caption} package.

\begin{verbatim}
\captionsetup{\% 
font={\normalfont}, 
labelformat={simple}, 
labelsep={period}, 
position=bottom, 
aboveskip=6pt, 
belowskip=-10pt}
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{1}See the \texttt{\par} on p. 11, line 249 of \texttt{ltfloat.dtx} from the \LaTeX{} kernel.

\textsuperscript{2}See David Carlisle’s answer on \LaTeX{} SE: \url{https://tex.stackexchange.com/a/310793}
In the author’s personal experience, most MLA-style papers use “Fig.” and not “Figure”.

5.6 Paper sections

5.6.1 Paper

paper The main content; the body. This environment exists only for a logical division and does nothing special.

5.6.2 Endnotes

notes Endnotes can be typeset manually or with the supported enotez package\(^1\).

To correctly format endnotes per common practice\(^2\), a custom mlanotes list type will be created. This is achieved with the enumitem package.

The following initializes the enotez package to use the mlanotes list format.

\(^1\)Refer to the enotez documentation for instructions.  
\(^2\)According to the popular, oft-referenced OWL: https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/mla_endnotes_and_footnotes.html.
5.6.3 Bibliography

The bibliography can be typeset manually or with the supported \texttt{biblatex} package\footnote{Refer to the \texttt{biblatex} documentation for instructions.}.

\begin{verbatim}
\newenvironment{workscited}{\%
\newpage
\begin{noindent}
\pdfbookmark[0]{Works Cited}{workscited}
\begin{center}Works Cited\end{center}
\end{noindent}
\vspace{-10pt} % XXX to counter unexplained space
\}}{}
\end{verbatim}

The \textit{Handbook} prescribes a half-inch hanging indent on all bibliography entries. This is achieved by setting the \texttt{\bibhang} length defined by the \texttt{biblatex} package.

\textbf{A \ Example usage}

Following is a basic \LaTeX{} document using the \texttt{mla} class. The document is composed of a text file, \texttt{mla-example.tex}, and a \texttt{biblatex} bibliography file, \texttt{mla-example.bib}.

\begin{verbatim}
\documentclass[mla8]{mla}
\title{Sample MLA Document}
\author{John Doe}
\professor{Dr. Suzie Que}
\course{\LaTeX\ 101}
\date{\mladate} % see docs for \texttt{\mladate}
\addbibresource{mla-example.bib}
\begin{document}
\begin{paper}
\section{Professors who prefer sections}
\end{paper}
\end{verbatim}

\begin{verbatim}
\begin{document}
\begin{paper}
\section{Professors who prefer sections}
\end{paper}
\end{verbatim}
Sometimes, research papers can become unmanageably lengthy. In that case, section headings can help divide up the ideas to make it more accessible to the reader. Though this paper is short, section headings are employed as an example of the ‘‘mla’’ class’ capabilities.

Some professors may explicitly require or denounce use of headings. Dr. Suzie Que of Anytown, PA requires they be used for anything longer than five pages:
\begin{blockquote}
John---so help me God---if you turn in another twenty-page research paper with no logical breaks I will hang you at the stake. Even though the MLA style guide doesn’t say anything about section headings, they’re not actually prohibited. So, if you turn in \emph{anything} longer than five pages to me and there isn’t a \emph{single} break or section heading, I will dock your grade to an F. Capisce? \cite{que2019}
\end{blockquote}

Despite her language, she does have a point to say.

\subsection{Subsections}

Alongside regular top-level sections, one can use \textbackslash{subsection} commands too\endnote{Section commands in ‘‘mla.cls’’ work identical to those of the ‘‘article’’ class.}.

\section{Lists}

Vertical lists are a rarity in MLA format, but if one so pleases, they can be used. The ‘‘itemize’’, ‘‘enumerate’’ and ‘‘description’’ lists work just as expected, even with sublists.

\begin{itemize}
\item A bogus item
\item Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet. This item has a bunch of text just so it covers more than one line in the paper and shows proper indentation.
\item Last item!
\end{itemize}

\begin{enumerate}
\item Just kidding; there’s a subitem. And it’s a number!
\end{enumerate}

\item Okay, now it’s the last item.
\end{itemize}
\section{Figures}

On rare occasions, you might have to use figures or tables in your paper. Good news is the ‘‘figure’’ and ‘‘table’’ environments work exactly as expected! Just make sure to use ‘‘\textbackslash{}begin\{figure\}[H]’’ if you want the image to stay exactly where you put it.\begin{figure}[H]
\includegraphics[width=0.5\linewidth]{mla-example-image}
\caption{A scene from atop Spruce Knob, West Virginia}
\end{figure}
And yes, I shamelessly used my own image.

\section{Using endnotes}

As one may notice, the above subsection used an endnote. These can simply be cited with ‘‘Yada yada text\textbackslash{}endnote\{more info\ldots\}.’’ Endnotes can be easily printed in correct format by calling ‘‘\textbackslash{}printendnotes’’ within the ‘‘notes’’ environment.

\section{Using bibliographies}

Dr. Suzie Que was cited in the above blockquote. The ins-and-outs of ‘‘biblatex’’ will not be explained in this document, so please refer to online documentation such as the ‘‘BibLaTeX Cheat Sheet’’.

Just as with the endnotes, the bibliography can be easily printed in correct format by calling ‘‘\textbackslash{}printbibliography[heading=none]’’ within the ‘‘workscited’’ environment. (The ‘‘heading=none’’ part is important; the ‘‘workscited’’ environment already prints one.)

\end{paper}
\begin{notes}
\printendnotes
\end{notes}
\begin{workscited}

13
\printbibliography[heading=none]
\end{workscited}
\end{document}

A.2 mla-example.bib
@article{que2019,
    author = {Suzie Que},
    title = {Notice to all students},
    journaltitle = {Anytown High School Homepage},
    publisher = {County Board of Education},
    date = {2019-04-20},
    howpublished = {Web},
    urldate = {2019-04-21}
}

@online{price2018,
    author = {Seth Price},
    title = {Spruce Knob Overlook},
    publisher = {Instagram},
    date = {2018-07-20},
    howpublished = {Web},
    url = {https://www.instagram.com/p/Bleocv-hknc/},
    urldate = {2019-05-29}
}