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Why MLA?: What citation tells us about the different disciplines

This is a quick mini-lecture I often give when introducing MLA citation. Students can experience the differences between MLA, APA, and Chicago as (at best) arbitrary or (at worst) the whim of their instructor. Here, I frame MLA in terms of demonstrating what it reveals to us about the stakes of the discipline. Even if they still think it’s a headache, at least now they have a sense of how and why we’re asking them to do it.

**MLA:** Used mainly for literature, languages, humanities

**In-text:** Just the last name and the page number.

**Works Cited/ Works Consulted:** Name, bibliographic info, date.

*(“Works Cited” = only citing what you quoted in-text. “Works Consulted” = all the texts you referenced for the paper)*

**APA:** Used mainly in the social sciences.

**In-text:** The name, the year, the page.

**References/ Bibliography**: Name, year, bibliographic info.

*(“References” v. “Bibliography” = same distinction as above)*

Usually I just compare these two for a quick & easy way to understand how “the humanities” situate the importance of the author versus the year, as compared to the social sciences. I ask: why doesn’t the humanities want to know (in-text, immediately) when it was written? Why is that so important to the social sciences? What is at stake in claiming that the author is more important than the year?