

# Formal Writing: A Writing Style Guide

Adapted from the MFS: Modern Fiction Studies style manual

## First and last names

When an author or critic is mentioned for the first time in an essay, use the first and last names; thereafter, use the last name only, unless there are two or more authors with the same last name. Where there is a passing reference to someone like Shakespeare or Goethe, there is no need to include a first name. This rule does not apply to character names.

## Emphasis

MLA strongly discourages the use of italics and scare quotes to draw emphasis to words or phrases. It is used as a crutch so that an author need not explain why they are placing emphasis on a particular phrase. Eliminate these from your writing and allow the language in your sentence to clearly demonstrate the emphasis needed.

## Block Quotations

Set a quote of 70 words or more as a block quote. Always put dialogue or poetry of more than three lines and dialogue in block quote format, regardless of word count:

That Ernst is an art dealer is equally important for DeLillo who, in previous work has espoused the link between artist and terrorist. In *Mao II*, DeLillo writes:

There's a curious knot that binds novelists and terrorists. In the West we become famous effigies as our books lose the power to shape and influence.... Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated. (41)<sup>xv</sup>

If Duvall is right that the novelist no longer passes muster in this globalized and terrorized world, then *Falling Man* carries this link to its logical conclusion where Janiak stands in for the terrorists in the aftermath of 9/11. This makes sense considering that it is his performance that disrupts the everyday and forces Americans to confront the repressed image of the falling man. For DeLillo, this is the task of the artist as well as the terrorist. Terrorists generate the counter-history. Artists generate the counter-narrative. But the two of these are indistinct from one another.

Describing the gaps in his relationship with April, he comments, "Maybe that was normal, too. Maybe every couple lived in the gaps between conversations, unable to say important things...; maybe every relationship started over every time two people came together" (146). Later he asks, "Perhaps nothing made sense anymore (*the gaps are affecting everyone*) and this was some kind of cultural illness they all shared" (264). He repeats these questions, wondering whether everyone experienced the world as he does. Remy laments to one of his informants:

"I find myself in these situations. I don't know how I got there, or what I'm doing. I don't know what's going to happen until after it happens. I do things that I don't understand and I wish I hadn't done them."

"Maybe that's what life is like for everyone," the man said.

Remy took a long swig of whiskey. "Is it?"

"I don't know. But what makes you think you're so special?" (128)

Remy's deteriorating health is not just a marker of his own illness, but rather is linked to the illness afflicting America writ large in which we generate the conditions of our own destruction, as Appadurai rightly pointed out.

## Indenting around Block Quotes

- ↪ Notice the normal first-line paragraph indentation at .5."
- ↪ Notice the block quotation indentation at 1"; and dialogue first-line indentation at 1.5."
- ↪ Notice that coming out of a block quotation, the first line is NOT indented, because you are finishing a paragraph.

## Capitalization

Use chapter 2 rather than Chapter Two. Also, preface, introduction, foreword, afterword, etc., are not capitalized (see 3.6.5 in the MLA Handbook for more information).

If the title of an essay includes a quotation, other rules apply. When the quotation in the title includes capitalized words, include the words as they appear in the original text; otherwise, capitalize only the first word of the quotation when it begins a title. For example: Tamlyn Monson's essay title correctly reads—"A trick of the mind": Alterity, Ontology, and Representation in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*—and Stacey Oster's essay title (from the Table of Contents for *Mfs 50.2*) correctly reads—A "Patch of England, at a three-thousand-Mile Off-set"? Representing America in Mason & Dixon.

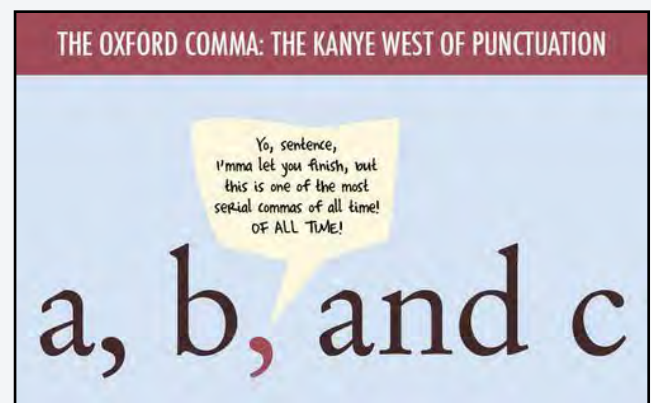
## Punctuation

### Commas in a Series

Always use the final comma to separate items in a series of three or more (hair, dirty, and smelly).

### Quotation Marks

Don't use single quotes (except for a quote within a quote), even when the author is coining a phrase.



### Apostrophes

Always use 's with singular words and names to indicate a possessive, even when the words end in s (Charles's, princess's). The exception here is biblical names, which keep the s' (Jesus' or Moses'). In the case of plural nouns ending in s, just use the apostrophe (animals').

### Ampersands

Change to "and" except in titles when the title page itself uses an ampersand (The Amazing Adventure of Kavalier & Clay).

### Commas/ M-Dashes/ Parentheses

Commas suggest a brief interruption from the flow of a sentence. For instance the interruption of a book title: Jacques Derrida's most important work, *Grammatology*, argues XYZ.

Parens, however, show an interruption that is unimportant to the text, or semi-relevant, but still useful information. You might say that "Phil Simms is a (somewhat lackluster) commentator on CBS's NFL Today show."

M-dashes, however, are a hybrid. A longer interruption that must be set off from the sentence, but also vital to the sentence's understanding. They are often used in condensing sentences, giving definitions, or just generally for clarification's sake.

Grammar: the difference between knowing your shit and knowing you're shit.



### Hyphen, En-Dash, Em-Dash

- An en-dash is used to demarcate a range of time (2003–2013).
- An em-dash is used to set aside a clause, akin to a parentheses or a comma.

## Hyphenation

- Use a hyphen (not a slash) to join coequal nouns (writer-critic, scholar-athlete) or a compound adjective including ordinals (second-semester courses, early-thirteenth-century fashions).
- Do not use a hyphen with these prefixes: anti, co, extra, inter, intra, multi, non, over, post, pre, pro, re, semi, socio, sub, trans, un, under. See Chicago page 229 for a more complete list.
- Do not use a hyphen with the suffix like (warlike).
- Do hyphenate if two like vowels are juxtaposed (semi-invalid) or readability is in question, or if the second element is a number or is capitalized (post-1960s, anti-Semitic).
- Do hyphenate compound adjectives when they precede the noun, including those ending with the present or the past participle and those beginning with an adverb such as better, best, ill, lower, little, or well (stench-loving doggie, ill-conceived plan, short-term effect). But do not hyphenate a compound made up of an adverb and an adjective—highly developed plan, for instance—and do not hyphenate compounds beginning with too, very, or much—much maligned editorial assistant, for instance. And if a compound adjective follows the noun it modifies, do not hyphenate (The plan is ill conceived).
- The hyphenation of the names of ethnic American groups is a vexing (and often controversial) issue. For various ideological reasons, individual authors may have strong preferences about including or omitting hyphens. "Native American" is never hyphenated—even when it appears as a compound adjective as in the phrase "Native American literature." Whatever you choose, be consistent in your use of hyphens.

## Numbers

- one, thirty-six, ninety-nine, one hundred, fifteen hundred, three million, 2 1/2; 101; 137; 1,275
- Note that numbers in one sentence presenting related figures should either be spelled out or expressed as numerals. If a sentence begins with a number or a date, always spell it out. In the case of chapter numbers, use numerals (chapter 4).
- Inclusive dates should appear as 1959-69, unless they span two+ centuries (1789-1832). Do not use a comma between a month and a year (August 1998). A date such as 9/11 should be referred to as 9/11 or September 11, not September 11th (or 11th).
- To refer to decades using numbers, use 1920s, not '20s or 1920's.
- Spell out ordinal numbers and fractions (one-third, nineteenth-century politics, second chapter, Second World War).