

Jerry Cantu

Josue Cruz-Lambert

Nolan Manteufel

Igor Popov

1300 San Pedro Ave  
San Antonio, TX 78212

---

December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2009

Mrs. Frances Crawford  
Director of the San Antonio College Writing Center  
1300 San Pedro Ave.  
San Antonio, TX 78212

Dear Mrs. Crawford:

As per our proposal, we have created a new MLA formatting guide for the Writing Center's use. We are submitting the enclosed formatting guide and a report entitled *Report on the New MLA Formatting Guide*.

The purpose of this report is to provide you with the changes that we made to the MLA formatting guide currently available at the Writing Center as well as to explain why we felt those changes would increase its usability. The report provides an explanation of the differences between the original guide and the revised version. Included in the report is an explanation of the steps we took to determine which changes were necessary and how those changes will increase productivity. The report concludes with feedback that we received from testers of our guide and sections where we postulate how the guide can be used.

I hope this report meets with your expectations and that the new formatting guide proves to be useful.

Respectfully,

Josue Cruz-Lambert, Gary Popov, Jerry Cantu, Nolan Manteufel

Encl.: The new formatting guide and our report

**Report  
on  
THE NEW MLA FORMATTING GUIDE**

submitted to  
Mrs. Frances Crawford  
Director of the San Antonio College Writing Center  
1300 San Pedro Ave  
San Antonio, TX 78212

December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2009

by  
Josue Cruz-Lambert, Gary Popov, Jerry Cantu, Nolan Manteufel

This report examines the creation of the new MLA formatting guide. The guide is also described, and compared to the previous version. Usability testing results and suggestions for how the guide can be used conclude the report.

## Table of Contents

LIST OF FIGURES.....	i
Figures.....	i
Tables.....	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. THE FUNCTION AND PURPOSE OF A FORMATTING GUIDE.....	2
III. PROBLEMS WITH THE EXISTING FORMATTING GUIDE.....	3
IV. OUR CHANGES AND THEIR RATIONALE.....	4
Physical Differences.....	4
Content Structure.....	4
Instruction Flow.....	5
Layout of the Graphics.....	5
Finalizing the Document.....	5
V. A COMPARISON OF THE TWO GUIDES.....	7
VI. USER RESPONSE.....	8
VII. SUGGESTED USE.....	11
VIII. CONCLUSION.....	12
APPENDIX A: THE OLD MLA FORMATTING GUIDE.....	13
APPENDIX B: USABILITY TESTING PLAN SUMMARY.....	14
APPENDIX C: INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE.....	15
APPENDIX D: FOLLOW UP QUESTIONNAIRE.....	16

## LIST OF FIGURES

### Figures

Figure 1. Number of users vs. years of computer experience.....	8
Figure 2. Number of users with prior word processor experience .....	8
Figure 3. Number of users that have used guides before .....	8

### Tables

Table 1. Old Version vs. New Version .....	7
Table 2. Results of the Follow Up Questionnaire .....	9

## **ABSTRACT**

MLA formatting guides are brief publications that explain how to set up a word processor so that it produces documents that adhere to the MLA style conventions. In this report we consider the features and purpose of a formatting guide and talk about how and why we created a new formatting guide even though one is already currently available at the San Antonio College Writing Center. The report concludes with a summary of the usability testing that we conducted for our guide and some suggestions as to how the guide can be used.

**Report**  
**on**  
**THE NEW MLA FORMATTING GUIDE**

**I. INTRODUCTION**

The MLA(Modern Language Association) research paper style and citation guide is one of the main styles governing college research papers. The page formatting style itself is very simple, but as most papers are typed on the computer, the onus is on the writer to know how to set up their word processor to produce a properly formatted document. There are many word processing applications out on the market that come with a large variety of features, but the person who is tasked with writing a paper in the MLA style only cares about the features that let them format the document to adhere to that style. For this purpose there exist guides that convey the bare minimum of information required for a person to properly setup their document.

The purpose of this report is to compare the MLA formatting guide currently available at the writing center with the updated version of the formatting guide that we created. In this report, we consider the function of a formatting guide and how we feel that the existing guide lacks in some aspects. Next, we describe the changes that we made to the guide and our rationale as to how these changes make the guide more usable. A summary of the usability testing that we conducted and our satisfactory results follows, and the report concludes with our suggestions as to how the guide can be used and deployed.

## II. THE FUNCTION AND PURPOSE OF A FORMATTING GUIDE

Before we can explain how we determined a new version of the guide was necessary, let's consider the function and features of a guide. Users consult guides when they are unfamiliar with the procedure at hand. If a user is looking at a guide, we can already assume that they are having problems with understanding what to do. At this point, the task of the guide is to explain in simple terms the complete steps that must be taken to reach the user's desired outcome. It is important to ensure that the steps in the guide are listed in the order that mirrors the steps that will be taken in the real world application. The writer of the guide must also make sure to not force the user to make leaps of logic to get from one step to the next. Including all of the information is only half of the story: the writer must also ensure that the guide is clear and concise without being too curt or brief.

A formatting guide, in this regard, has to convey enough information across to let the user set their document up to the standards dictated by the MLA and nothing more. The main areas that such a guide should focus on are:

- **Margins:** 1" x 1" on all sides.
- **Spacing:** The paper should be double spaced.
- **Header:** All pages must contain a page number and the writer's last name.
- **First page header:** The first page must at least contain a header with the writer's name, course number, instructor's name, and the date.
- **Font:** The font and font size are usually specified by the instructor, but must be uniform throughout the paper.

### III. PROBLEMS WITH THE EXISTING FORMATTING GUIDE.

The existing formatting guide, a copy of which can be found in Appendix A, describes how to set up a Microsoft Word 2007 document. The guide is one page long, is single spaced, has a small font, and includes all of the information that a basic MLA formatting guide should have. Unfortunately, we feel that it has one large downfall: it requires too much reading. Anyone needing a guide to properly format their document is most likely not very skilled at using a computer to begin with and so this brings up a host of problems:

- Steps are difficult to remember without context. For each step that a person has to accomplish, they have to look at the instructions and then look at the monitor to try to understand what the directions refer to.
- It is easy to lose your place while consulting the guide. Individual steps are not numbered and each section of a guide exists as a thick “wall” of text that the eye wanders over.
- It is difficult to tell whether the instructions were followed correctly. The guide consists of a list of steps that, if taken correctly, should lead to the correct product, but there is no way for the user to really know whether what they did is correct without a visual representation of the finished product.
- The guide is very unassuming and unless a user is directed towards it or starts reading it, it is unlikely that they will realize what the guide is meant is to accomplish.

As a result of these shortfalls, we have decided to produce a guide that we feel is clearer and is better suited to help users who are new to Microsoft Word 2007.



## IV. OUR CHANGES AND THEIR RATIONALE

**Physical Differences.** We initially decided to make the guide into a one page pamphlet with information on the back and front, but after noticing how many images we wanted to include so that every step had an accompanying image, we decided to make the updated guide into a complete booklet. Upon deciding on the booklet style, we worked on figuring out what the best layout was to take full advantage of the booklet format. We felt that it was best to have one ‘task’ per page so as to prevent the user from accidentally jumping ahead to other tasks. The instructions and images for most of the tasks comfortably took up half of an 8” x 11” page so we decided that the page size for the booklet would be half of a page with a landscape orientation.

**Content Structure.** Overall the information of the new guide fundamentally remains the same and the primary purpose is to still guide a user from a raw document to one that adheres to the MLA style. With this in mind, the guide is window-centric in that each page focuses on a single window or pane from the Microsoft Word 2007 interface. A single page has an image of the window with the right settings highlighted to alert the user that their window should look the same. It is our hope that the gratuitous use of images will allow the user to compare their progress at every step of the way so that they do not become lost or confused.

Another notable difference in content is the lack of large blocks of text that contain instructions or introductions. Unofficial user testing at that point showed us that users skip or skim over large blocks of text because they want to get straight to the action. As a result, we tried to limit the number of words per page and tried to make the images speak for themselves.

The guide, as a whole, also begins with a table of contents so that the user can quickly find what they want to do and jump straight to the right page.

**Instruction Flow.** The flow of tasks in the guide follows flow of tabs in the Word 2007 ribbon. We go from the Home tab (far left), to Insert, and then to the Page Layout tab. In each tab, the tasks described go from left to right depending on the position of the interface control. The reason for this is because we did not want to force the user to bounce back and forth between tabs and we also decided it would be more efficient if we only needed to show the image of the entire tab once and then just focus on the buttons with the tab for subsequent steps before switching to a new tab.

**Layout of the Graphics.** When it came down to laying out the document, we had to fit the steps and images into one small landscape area, while maintaining the images clearly visible and readable. For the longer images, we simply turned them into 3-D objects and skewed them so that the less relevant information receded into the distance. Finally, many times we included a view of the entire interface to help the users reorient themselves much as they would with a map. We based this on the fact that interfaces, like maps, have reference points, and so by including the interface, the users can set up their own coordinate systems to find the buttons they need.

**Finalizing the Document.** To give the booklet a more professional look, we added borders and page numbering to each page. At this step we felt that the guide lacked a human touch. While the information and layout were very accurate, it was quite plain and boring. We began brainstorming ideas on how to make the guide stand out more, without diminishing its professional look. We concluded that the best way was to make the cover page more attractive

by including Microsoft Word 2007 logo, and making the font bigger and friendlier. With all of these different additions we hope that users will see this guide as an easy yet powerful tool.

## V. A COMPARISON OF THE TWO GUIDES

Table 1. Old Version vs. New Version		
Version	Old Version	New Version
Number of Tasks	4	4
Amount of Text	Moderate	Minimal
Table of Contents	None	Included
Page Length	1 page, 11" X 8 ½"	10 pages, 5 ½" X 8 ½"
Amount of graphics included	None	Multiple per page
Organization of content	Tasks are a block of text separated by one line	One task per page
Task structure	One step per line, no numbering	Steps are numbered and accompanied with descriptive images.

As can be seen from this chart, we have corrected all of the concerns that we had with the original version in our new version. The four concerns have been fixed as follows:

- Context is now provided for each step with clear images.
- Text is used very sparingly there is considerably more white space. Each task also has its own page so it is unambiguous as to what is currently being described.
- Images show the final outcome of a series of steps and an image at the very end of the guide now shows what a properly formatted document should look like.
- The format of the guide (half-page, landscape) and the big bold text on the cover draw attention to the guide and make it very clear as to what it is about.

## VI. USER RESPONSE

To test our guide, we conducted usability testing as specified in our usability testing plan (a brief summary of the testing plan can be found in Appendix B). Unfortunately we were unable to find any subjects that fit our target profile of a college aged completely computer illiterate user. Our Initial Questionnaire (found in Appendix C) that we gave to our testers gives us these following statistics concerning their prior experience.

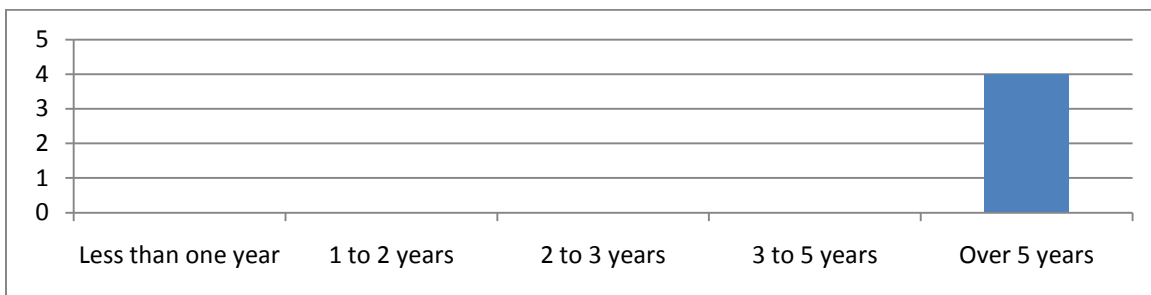


Figure 1. Number of users vs. years of computer experience

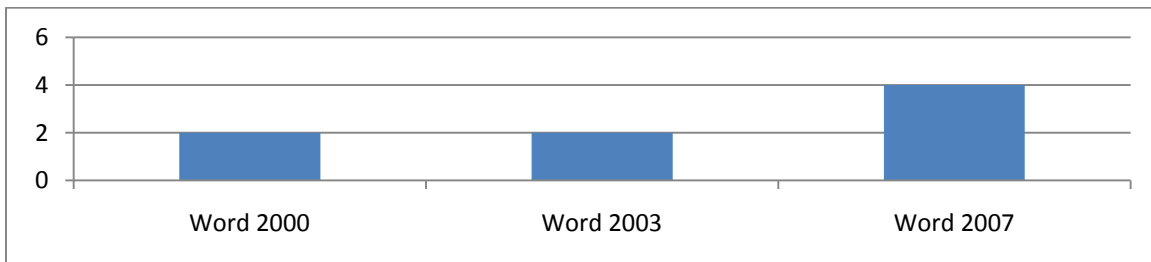


Figure 2. Number of users with prior word processor experience

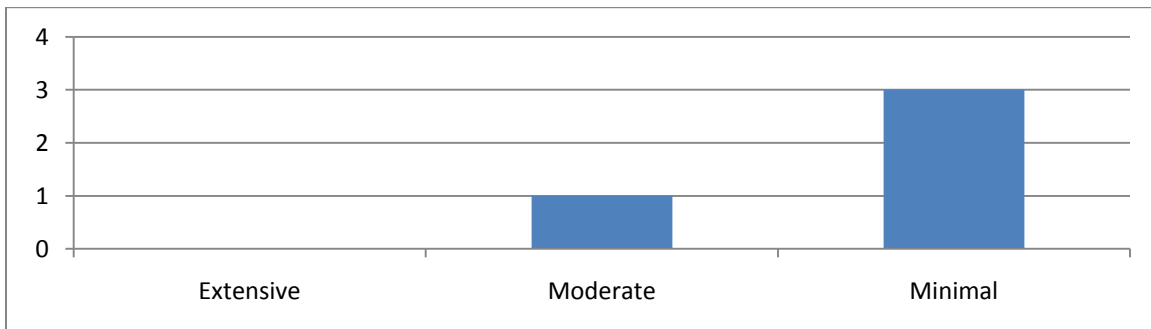


Figure 3. Number of users vs. prior experience with using guides

Although we did not have the kind of user that we were hoping for, we still think that we collected some valuable data from our Follow Up Questionnaire (Appendix D). Here is a summary of the results from the questionnaire.

	Yes	No
Do you feel the guide contained enough information?	4 (100%)	0 (0%)
Do you feel that the guide was clear?	4 (100%)	0 (0%)
Do you like the layout (text & illustrations) of each page?	4 (100%)	0 (0%)
Do you like the layout/chronological progression of the guide?	4 (100%)	0 (0%)
Do you like the format (paper size) of the guide?	4 (100%)	0 (0%)

**Table 2. Results of the Follow Up Questionnaire**

Some users provided specific feedback on some minor issues:

- It was not immediately clear that the images showed exactly what the settings should be set to. We have corrected this by putting highlighting and boxes around the values shown so as to draw the user’s attention to that area.
- On page 4, it was unclear that the spacing has to be set to 0pt for the ‘after’ field and that the line spacing should be set to ‘double’. This has been corrected by explicitly including those directives in the steps of the guide.
- A user had problems with setting the page numbering to the correct setting. We have corrected this by splitting that task up over two pages to show what the final result should look like and adding a note about adding the last name next to the page number.

Overall, our results suggest that our guide is clear and understandable. Although we were unable to test the guide out on its target audience, from our personal observations of our test subjects we saw that the guide contained a few pieces of information that were new to our subjects (such as modifying the post-paragraph spacing) and that we were able to convey this new bit of information to them successfully. We can extrapolate this successful transfer of information to the rest of the document to come to the conclusion that our method works. We have dealt with the issues that were brought up and now feel confident that the guide is ready for distribution.

## VII. SUGGESTED USE

The guide can be placed anywhere a user may need help setting up a document to conform to MLA standards. Here are some suggestions for its distribution:

- *Classrooms.* Many classes require research papers formatted in the MLA style. It would be great to inform professors about the guide which they could distribute in class.
- *Tutoring.* Tutoring labs such as the Writing Center and other computer labs could keep a few copies of the guide handy for students to use. The center could keep a few color copies for use at the center and distribute cheaper black and white copies for students to take with them. Dedicated copies of the guide could even be laminated.
- *Libraries.* Many students write their papers right where they research them and the library could make the guides available for students to use.
- *The internet.* A copy of the guide can be placed on the Writing Center's page for students to download when they are at home. The guide can be viewed on the computer or printed.



## VIII. CONCLUSION

During the course of this project we have created a new MLA formatting guide to replace the one that is currently available at the writing center. The old guide had a few flaws that we recognized such as its rather monotonous and plain approach to giving instructions that we fixed in our version by including considerably many more images. The new guide is over all clearer in its presentation of the material because it outlines each step in detail and is friendlier towards the user as it does not present scary looking blocks of text instead relying on images to convey the information.

The usability testing that we conducted points to a warm reception of our new version. Our testers had only a few problems using our guide (which have since been corrected) and we feel that the guide, in its current state, is ready for distribution. The guide can be made available in a multitude of places: it can be handed out by teacher, left for students to take from places like the library or the writing center, or placed on the internet as a PDF so that students can download it from their home computer.

## **APPENDIX A: THE OLD MLA FORMATTING GUIDE**

This guide, titled “MLA Formatting,” may be found on the turn table at the Writing Center.

## **APPENDIX B: USABILITY TESTING PLAN SUMMARY**

### **Usability Testing**

Our ideal tester would be someone who has just enrolled in Freshman Composition I and is about to write their first MLA-formatted paper. This tester would have used computers before, but not word processors. Once we have screened enough people to find such a tester, we would conduct our testing in the following way:

- 1) We sit the tester down and tell them that their assignment is to write an MLA-formatted essay and present them the guide on how to set up Word with the proper formatting. Also, we explain to them that we cannot help them with any of the tasks in the guide.
- 2) We sit back and record how long it takes the tester to accomplish each task with a stopwatch and whether they seem to understand what they are doing. We'll ask the tester to voice their thoughts as they go through the guide, but will not help them out.
- 3) Once the tester has gone through the entire guide and is ready to start typing their essay, we hold a brief interview with them to find out which parts they found helpful or unhelpful.

The entire process should not take longer than 15 minutes.

## APPENDIX C: INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE

### Initial Questionnaire

Thank you for taking a few minutes to answer the following questions.

Describe your experience using computers.

***I have used computers for:***

over 5 years / 3 to 5 years / 2 to 3 years / 1 to 2 years / less than 1 year

***Most of my computer experience has been in a:***

Professional Setting / Personal Setting / Other: \_\_\_\_\_

***When I have a computer question, most often I:***

Find the answer myself / Ask a friend for help / Other: \_\_\_\_\_

***My experience with MS Word templates is:***

Extensive / Basic / Minimal

***My experience using User Guides is:***

Extensive / Moderate / Minimal

## APPENDIX D: FOLLOW UP QUESTIONNAIRE

### Follow Up Questionnaire

Thank you for taking a few minutes to answer the following questions.

*Does the tester feel that the guide covered enough information?*

Yes / No      If necessary, explain: \_\_\_\_\_

---

*Does the tester feel that they understood what they were doing?*

Yes / No      If necessary, explain: \_\_\_\_\_

---

*Does the tester feel that the guide was clear?*

Yes / No      If necessary, explain: \_\_\_\_\_

---

*Does the tester feel that they can recreate the steps in the future?*

Yes / No      If necessary, explain: \_\_\_\_\_

---

*Which parts did the tester find easy?*

Using the MLA template / Formatting the document / Using the formatting guide      If  
necessary, explain: \_\_\_\_\_

---

*Which parts did the tester find difficult?*

Using the MLA template / Formatting the document / Using the formatting guide      If  
necessary, explain: \_\_\_\_\_

---

*Does the tester like the layout (text & illustrations) of each page?*

Yes / No      If necessary, explain: \_\_\_\_\_

---

*Does the tester like the layout/chronological progression of the guide?*

Yes / No      If necessary, explain: \_\_\_\_\_

---

*Does the tester like the format (paper size) of the guide?*

Yes / No      If necessary, explain: \_\_\_\_\_

---