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Joseph Gibaldi. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. 6th edition. New York: MLA, 2003. 361p.

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Sample citations in the *MLA Handbook* confer a mode of celebrity on the authors cited. Citations come and go, but no one who is familiar with previous editions of the *MLA Handbook* will be surprised to hear that it continues its long life as an exemplary work in its new edition. The *Handbook* is sensible, clear, cogent, and as readable as a manual can be. The book offers abundant cross-references and an index. Explanations make some conventions less arbitrary than others and than they appear: for instance scientific systems of documentation emphasize dates more than MLA style does because research in the humanities has a longer shelf life than in the sciences (143), and the hanging indentations in the list of works cited make it easy to use an alphabetized list (145). As the design on the cover of the sixth edition suggests, while the angle is different, the pattern remains familiar. The sixth edition emphasizes the content of student writing more than its predecessors did, although it still privileges form, as it should.

The rules haven't changed much. The sixth edition restricts to ambiguous cases the direction in the fifth to bracket the dots that signify an ellipsis in a quotation to distinguish them from authorial ellipsis (117-118). Gibaldi points out that while conventions of both publication and citation have been well established for a long time as far as printed materials are concerned, those for electronic materials are uncertain and fluid (207-208). His guidelines for electronic sources are detailed, but necessarily provisional, and their tone is less authoritative than that of the earlier sections, for instance when he discusses "A Work in an Indeterminate Medium" (230). The font of the sample entries now suggests a printer, rather than a typewriter. One of the most valuable sections of the long first chapter on research and writing emphasizes the importance of evaluating sources and provides criteria (41-45). Gibaldi explains the difference between a site that is peer-reviewed and one that is self-published (41-42). Now that the web is the first and sometimes the only resource to which many students turn, they need the information here more than they probably realize.

Gibaldi has added long sections, like those in many textbooks, on such subjects as choosing a topic and working through successive drafts; a summary follows each section. Writing however is a profoundly personal activity, and we all have to find our own ways of doing it, ways that may vary for each writer from text to text and project to project, as Gibaldi recognizes and takes into account

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(4, 46, 57). An author's or teacher's suggestions may or may not work for a particular student. Surely all our suggestions don't work all the time.

The ideal reader of the *MLA Handbook* may not exist: a student who, in addition to all the other hard work involved in research, note-taking, organization, writing, and revision, reads through the *MLA Handbook* and worries about details like the difference between a journal with continuous pagination and one with new pagination in every issue (182-183). Is such a student likely to need an explanation of the kinds of information that dictionaries contain (12-13)? There may be a correlation between students who produce papers with interesting and readable content and those who at least do their best to follow MLA form and to produce a decent-looking paper. Many, by no means all, of the papers I receive look as if they were thrown together at the last minute. Some manifest extreme desperation in being plagiarized by students who thereby sacrifice the opportunity to go through the whole process of research and writing, with its multiple interdependent decisions, and then to receive comments on their work and evaluation of it. That process, repeated, is an invaluable element of the larger process that turns students into educated people. In his discussion of plagiarism Gibaldi notes that the "purpose of a research paper is to synthesize previous research and scholarship with your ideas on the subject" (69) and that the process "opens the door to learning more about yourself and developing a personal voice and approach in your writing" (68). My fear is that the students who need the *MLA Handbook* most and would profit most from its sensible counsel are those least likely to take the time to consult it.

The material on plagiarism has grown from a section of five pages to a chapter of ten, presumably in response to a growing and recalcitrant problem. Clearly there is a continuum between the quest of perfection as it manifests itself in concern about minutiae of conventions and academic integrity, as there is a continuum from negligence to dishonesty (69-70), and yet I think few professors, if any, would impose the severe penalties appropriate to plagiarism, or indeed any penalties at all, on students who use a different system, whether a standard one like Chicago, APA, or CBE, or, more frequently, an utterly eccentric one, provided that the students acknowledge their sources and the extent of their indebtedness and provide the information that is necessary to locate those sources. While I certainly encourage my students to use MLA form and to use it correctly, I will continue to save my outrage for dishonesty. Students accused of plagiarism sometimes try to defend themselves by reducing the problem to one that merely involves trivial formalities of documentation. Although it's very difficult to show our students the

continuum in relation to its extremes we have to do everything we can think of to help them to see it.

The *MLA Handbook* descends from the *MLA Style Sheet*, which was originally addressed to audiences of scholars, as well as graduate and undergraduate students. The *Handbook* for students then split off from the *Style Guide* for scholars and graduate students. Will some future edition of the *Handbook* split again between the kind of compendious guide that takes students step by step through the research paper and a briefer text that only addresses documentation and form? I find the book most useful as a compilation of rules, a resource, a reference work, a statement of good practice, to which I can refer students, rather than as a body of material for them to master.

Gibaldi exhorts his readers to consider their audience (50). His own audience is however unclear. The book will be more valuable to graduate students, teachers, and scholars, who will find it indispensable, than for the high school, college, and university students for whom the MLA intends it (xvi). ❀