

MLA 9th Edition Annotated Example Paper

Complete Format Guide with Annotations

FIRST PAGE FORMAT

[Top right corner, 0.5 inch from top] Chen 1

[Top left corner, 1 inch from top, double-spaced] Sarah Chen Professor Jennifer Martinez
English 102: Composition and Literature 15 May 2024

[Centered, double-spaced from heading] Symbolism and the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby*

[Body text begins, first line indented 0.5 inch] F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* remains one of the most profound examinations of the American Dream in twentieth-century literature. Through intricate symbolism—particularly the green light, the valley of ashes, and the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg—Fitzgerald exposes the corruption and moral bankruptcy underlying 1920s prosperity. These symbols work collectively to demonstrate that the American Dream, premised on upward mobility and self-reinvention, ultimately proves hollow and destructive. The novel's symbolic landscape reveals how materialistic excess masks spiritual emptiness, transforming aspiration into obsession and promise into disillusionment.

The green light at the end of Daisy's dock serves as the novel's central symbol, representing both Gatsby's impossible desire and the broader futility of the American Dream. Gatsby reaches toward this "single green light, minute and far away" that represents everything he has lost and desperately seeks to reclaim (Fitzgerald 21). The light's physical distance mirrors the unbridgeable gap between Gatsby's idealized past and his present reality. Nick observes that Gatsby "believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us" (180). This description captures the essential tragedy of the American Dream: the more desperately one pursues it, the further it retreats. The verb "recedes" suggests not mere difficulty but impossibility—the dream moves backward as the dreamer moves forward, ensuring perpetual dissatisfaction.

ANNOTATIONS FOR FIRST PAGE: ✓ Header: Last name and page number (0.5 inch from top, right-aligned) ✓ Heading: Student name, professor name with title, course, date (left-aligned, double-spaced) ✓ Date format: Day Month Year (15 May 2024, not May 15, 2024) ✓ Title: Centered, no bold/italics/underline, Title Case ✓ Spacing: Double-spaced throughout entire paper, no extra spaces ✓ Margins: 1 inch on all sides ✓ Font: Times New Roman 12pt (or legible serif font) ✓ Indent: First line of each paragraph 0.5 inch (Tab key) ✓ NO separate title page in MLA format ✓ Page numbers: Continue on every page

[New paragraph, indented] Fitzgerald deepens this symbolism through color associations. Green traditionally symbolizes hope and renewal, yet in the novel it becomes tainted by association with money—the "green" of dollar bills. Gatsby's pursuit conflates romantic longing with material acquisition, suggesting the American Dream itself confuses spiritual fulfillment with wealth accumulation. When Nick reflects on Gatsby's yearning, he connects it to the original Dutch sailors who encountered America: "Gatsby believed in the green light... It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther" (180). This passage universalizes Gatsby's tragedy, suggesting that American optimism itself rests on inevitable disappointment. The dream requires belief in infinite possibility and perpetual progress, yet human limitation ensures failure.

Where the green light symbolizes desire, the valley of ashes represents the moral and spiritual wasteland created by unchecked materialism. Fitzgerald describes it as "a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens" (23). This perversion of agricultural metaphors—farms should produce life, not waste—emphasizes how industrial capitalism destroys rather than creates. The valley exists as a byproduct of New York's excess, a dumping ground for the consequences of wealth. Those who inhabit it, like George Wilson, lead lives of "grey" desperation, forgotten by the society that benefits from their labor (25).

The spatial positioning of the valley between West Egg and New York carries symbolic weight. Every character must pass through this wasteland to reach the city, yet none acknowledge it. Tom and Daisy drive "on through the cooling twilight" without seeing the "desolate area" they cross (126). This willful blindness represents the wealthy's refusal to recognize the human cost of their privilege. The valley literalizes what remains invisible in the novel's glamorous parties and luxurious estates: the destruction underlying prosperity. Fitzgerald suggests that the American Dream's promise of upward mobility necessarily creates a permanent underclass whose exploitation enables others' success.

ANNOTATIONS FOR BODY PARAGRAPHS: ✓ Topic sentences: Clear analytical claims ✓ Evidence integration: Quotations introduced and analyzed ✓ In-text citations: (Author page) format - no comma, no "p." ✓ Citations: At end of sentence before period, unless quote ends sentence ✓ Long quotes: See next section for block quote format ✓ Analysis: Interpretation follows evidence ✓ Present tense: Used for discussing literary texts ("Fitzgerald describes," not "described") ✓ Transitions: Connect paragraphs and ideas

[New paragraph showing block quote format] The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg preside over this wasteland, serving as a symbol of absent moral authority. Nick describes the billboard:

The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic—their retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face, but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a nonexistent nose. Evidently some wild wag of an oculist set them up there to fatten his practice in the borough of Queens, and then sank down himself into eternal blindness, or forgot them and moved away. But his eyes, dimmed a little by many paintless days, under sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground. (23-24)

The eyes watch but cannot see; they judge but have no power to punish. Their faded, commercial origin—an advertisement for a long-gone optometrist—suggests that moral oversight in this world has been replaced by empty capitalism. When George Wilson looks at the billboard after Myrtle's death, he tells Michaelis, "God sees everything," pointing at the eyes (159). Wilson mistakes advertising for divinity, revealing how thoroughly commercial values have supplanted spiritual ones. The billboard's decay mirrors society's moral deterioration, while its persistence suggests that hollow symbols endure even as genuine meaning disappears.

ANNOTATIONS FOR BLOCK QUOTES: ✓ Use for: Quotations longer than 4 lines of prose (or 3 lines of poetry) ✓ Format: Start on new line, indent entire quote 1 inch from left margin ✓ Spacing: Double-spaced like rest of paper ✓ Quotation marks: Do NOT use quotation marks for block quotes ✓ Citation: After final punctuation, in parentheses (Author page-page) ✓ Text continues: After citation, continue regular paragraph or start new one

[Continuing body paragraphs] These three symbols interact to create Fitzgerald's critique of the American Dream. The green light represents desire, the valley of ashes reveals the cost of that desire, and Eckleburg's eyes watch it all with unseeing indifference. Together, they suggest that the dream rests on a foundation of moral emptiness. Gatsby's reinvention—from James Gatz to Jay Gatsby—exemplifies the dream's promise of self-creation, yet his trajectory ends in murder and an empty funeral. His transformation requires abandoning his past, his family, and ultimately his integrity. He becomes wealthy through criminal activity, suggesting that success in this system necessitates moral compromise.

Nick's final meditation connects Gatsby's personal tragedy to America's historical trajectory. He imagines the Dutch sailors encountering "a fresh, green breast of the new world," a moment when the American Dream existed in pure, uncorrupted form (180). Yet this nostalgic vision ignores that even this "virgin" land required displacing indigenous peoples and would be built on enslaved labor. Fitzgerald hints that the dream was always illusory, always predicated on exploitation and violence. The novel's symbolic structure reveals these contradictions: green symbolizes both hope and money, ashes represent both progress and waste, and watching eyes see nothing. The American Dream promises transcendence but delivers only material accumulation, spiritual bankruptcy, and inevitable disappointment.

ANNOTATIONS FOR ANALYSIS: ✓ Deep interpretation: Goes beyond plot summary ✓ Connection to thesis: Each paragraph supports main argument ✓ Literary present tense: "Fitzgerald suggests," "The symbol represents" ✓ Integration of evidence: Quotes support analysis, not replace it ✓ Sophisticated language: Academic but accessible ✓ Critical thinking: Interprets meaning, explores implications

[Final paragraph - conclusion] Through his symbolic landscape, Fitzgerald exposes the American Dream's fundamental contradictions. The green light beckons from across an unbridgeable distance, the valley of ashes accumulates the dream's human wreckage, and Eckleburg's blind eyes offer no moral reckoning. These symbols collectively argue that American prosperity rests on spiritual emptiness and moral failure. Gatsby's tragedy becomes America's tragedy: a nation built on promises of possibility that mask systemic exploitation and inevitable disillusionment. The novel's enduring relevance stems from this critique—the American Dream continues to seduce with green lights while producing valleys of ashes, watched over by indifferent commercial gods. Fitzgerald's symbols remain resonant because the contradictions they expose persist: we still believe in infinite possibility while confronting finite reality, still pursue material success while experiencing spiritual bankruptcy, still reach for green lights that recede with every step forward.

ANNOTATIONS FOR CONCLUSION: ✓ Synthesis: Brings together main points ✓ Thesis restatement: Rephrased, not repeated verbatim ✓ Broader significance: Connects to larger themes ✓ No new evidence: Only synthesis of existing analysis ✓ Strong ending: Memorable final sentence ✓ Present tense maintained: Throughout

WORKS CITED PAGE

[New page, header continues] Chen 5

[Centered] Works Cited

[Hanging indent, alphabetical, double-spaced] Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. Scribner, 2004.

Mizener, Arthur. *The Far Side of Paradise: A Biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. Houghton Mifflin, 1951.

Pelzer, Linda Claycomb. "The American Dream in *The Great Gatsby*." *Student Companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald*. Greenwood Press, 2000, pp. 57-71.

Tyson, Lois. "The Great Gatsby: A Marxist Reading." *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, 3rd ed., Routledge, 2015, pp. 65-82.

ANNOTATIONS FOR WORKS CITED: ✓ New page: Start on fresh page with header continuing ✓ Title: "Works Cited" centered, not bold/italics/underlined ✓ Alphabetical: By author's last name (or title if no author) ✓ Hanging indent: First line flush left, subsequent lines indented 0.5 inch ✓ Double-spaced: Throughout, including between entries ✓ Author format: Last name, First name. ✓ Title formatting: See section below for specifics ✓ Publication info: Publisher, Year. ✓ Punctuation: Periods separate major elements

COMPLETE FORMATTING RULES

HEADER FORMAT

Every page: - Last name and page number - 0.5 inch from top - Right-aligned - Same font as body text - Example: Chen 1

In word processors: - Insert header - Type last name, space, insert page number - Right-align

FIRST PAGE HEADING

Top left corner (1 inch from top): 1. Your full name 2. Instructor's name (with title: Professor, Dr.) 3. Course number and name 4. Date (Day Month Year format)

All double-spaced

TITLE

Format: - Centered - Double-spaced from heading - Standard capitalization (Title Case) - NO bold, italics, underlining, or quotation marks - Exception: If title includes title of another work, format that part appropriately

Examples: - Symbolism in *The Great Gatsby* (book title italicized) - Analysis of "The Road Not Taken" (poem in quotes)

BODY TEXT

Paragraphs: - First line indented 0.5 inch (Tab key) - Double-spaced throughout - No extra spaces between paragraphs - Left-aligned (ragged right)

Spacing: - After periods: One space - After colons: One space - After commas: One space

IN-TEXT CITATIONS

BASIC FORMAT

Author in text: - Fitzgerald describes the light as "minute and far away" (21).

Author in parentheses: - The green light appears "minute and far away" (Fitzgerald 21).

Format rules: - (Author page) - NO comma, NO "p." or "pp." - If author named in sentence, only page number in parentheses - Place citation before period (unless block quote)

MULTIPLE AUTHORS

One author: - (Smith 45)

Two authors: - (Smith and Jones 45) - Use "and," not "&"

Three or more authors: - (Smith et al. 45) - "et al." with period

SPECIAL CASES

No page numbers (websites, e-books without pages): - (Author) - No page number needed

Paragraph or section numbers: - (Author par. 5) - (Author sec. 2)

No author: - ("Article Title" 12) - Use shortened title in quotation marks

Multiple works by same author: - (Fitzgerald, *Great Gatsby* 21) - (Fitzgerald, *Tender*

45) - Include shortened title

Indirect source (quoting someone quoted in your source): - Hemingway said “...”
(qtd. in Smith 45) - Avoid when possible

Literary works:

For novels: - (Fitzgerald 21; ch. 3) - page; chapter - Helps readers with different editions

For plays: - (Shakespeare 3.2.115-117) - act.scene.lines - Example: (Hamlet 3.2.115-117)

For poems: - (Wordsworth lines 1-4) - first reference includes “lines” - (1-4) - subsequent references

Multiple sources in one citation: - (Smith 45; Jones 78; Williams 90) - Semicolons
separate sources - Alphabetical order

WORKS CITED FORMATS

CORE ELEMENTS (IN ORDER)

1. Author.
2. Title of source.
3. Title of container,
4. Other contributors,
5. Version,
6. Number,
7. Publisher,
8. Publication date,
9. Location.

Note: Include only relevant elements. Not all sources have all elements.

AUTHOR FORMATS

One author:

Last name, First name.

Two authors:

Last name, First name, and First name Last name.

Three or more authors:

Last name, First name, et al.

Organization/Corporate author:

Organization Name.

No author: - Begin with title - Alphabetize by first major word (skip A, An, The)

TITLE FORMATTING

Italicize: - Books - Journals - Magazines - Newspapers - Websites - Films - TV shows - Albums - Plays - Long poems published as books

Quotation marks: - Articles - Short stories - Poems (not book-length) - Essays - Book chapters - Episodes - Songs

Title Case: - Capitalize first word, last word, and all major words - Lowercase: a, an, the, and, but, or, for, nor, to, prepositions under 5 letters

BOOKS

Basic book:

Author. Book Title. Publisher, Year.

Example:

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. Scribner, 2004.

Book with edition:

Author. Book Title. Edition number, Publisher, Year.

Example:

Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today*. 3rd ed., Routledge, 2015.

Edited book:

Editor, First name, editor. Book Title. Publisher, Year.

Book chapter or essay:

Author. "Chapter/Essay Title." Book Title, edited by First name Last name, Publisher, Year, pp. page-page.

Example:

Pelzer, Linda Claycomb. "The American Dream in *The Great Gatsby*." *Student Companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald*, Greenwood Press, 2000, pp. 57-71.

E-book:

Author. Book Title. E-book ed., Publisher, Year.

OR include URL/DOI if accessed online:

Author. Book Title. Publisher, Year. Database/Website, URL.

ARTICLES

Journal article:

Author. "Article Title." Journal Title, vol. number, no. number, Year, pp. page-page.

Example:

Smith, John. "Symbolism in *Gatsby*." *American Literature Review*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2023, pp. 123-145.

Journal article with DOI:

Author. "Article Title." Journal Title, vol. number, no. number, Year, pp. page-page., DOI.

Example:

Jones, Mary. "The American Dream Deferred." *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 52, no. 3, 2022, pp. 234-256., doi:10.1093/jas/xyz123.

Magazine article:

Author. "Article Title." Magazine Title, Day Month Year, pp. page-page.

Example:

Williams, Sarah. "Fitzgerald's Lasting Legacy." *The New Yorker*, 15 Apr. 2024, pp. 45-48.

Newspaper article:

Author. "Article Title." Newspaper Title, Day Month Year, pp. page-page.

Example:

Brown, David. "Gatsby Still Resonates 100 Years Later." The New York Times, 10 Apr. 2025, pp. C1-C2.

WEBSITES**Webpage:**

Author. "Page Title." Website Title, Publisher (if different from website), Day Month Year, URL.

Example:

"The American Dream." The Great Gatsby Study Guide, SparkNotes, 2024, www.sparknotes.com/lit/gatsby/themes/.

Online article:

Author. "Article Title." Website Title, Day Month Year, URL.

Example:

Martinez, Ana. "Rereading Gatsby in 2024." Literary Hub, 12 Mar. 2024, www.lithub.com/rereading-gatsby-2024/.

Website with no author:

"Page Title." Website Title, Publisher, Date, URL.

Website with no date:

Author. "Page Title." Website Title, URL. Accessed Day Month Year.

OTHER SOURCES**Film:**

Title. Directed by First name Last name, Distributor, Year.

Example:

The Great Gatsby. Directed by Baz Luhrmann, Warner Bros., 2013.

YouTube video:

Author/Username. "Video Title." YouTube, uploaded by Username, Day Month Year, URL.

Social media post:

Author. "Full text of post." Platform, Day Month Year, URL.

OR for short posts:

Author. "First 20 words of post..." Platform, Day Month Year, URL.

Interview:

Interviewee. "Interview Title." Interview by Interviewer Name, Publication, Day Month Year, URL if online.

Podcast episode:

"Episode Title." Podcast Name, hosted by Host Name, season number, episode number, Publisher, Day Month Year, URL.

Song:

Artist. "Song Title." Album Title, Label, Year.

Lecture/Presentation:

Speaker. "Presentation Title." Conference/Event Name, Day Month Year, Location.

FORMATTING CHECKLIST

Before submitting:

GENERAL: ☐ Times New Roman 12pt font (or similar serif) ☐ 1-inch margins all sides
☐ Double-spaced throughout (no extra spaces anywhere) ☐ Left-aligned text (ragged right edge)

HEADER: ☐ Last name + page number on every page ☐ 0.5 inch from top, right-aligned

FIRST PAGE: ☐ Heading in top left (name, professor, course, date) ☐ Heading double-spaced
☐ Date format: Day Month Year ☐ Title centered, no special formatting ☐ Title double-spaced from heading

BODY: ☐ First line of paragraphs indented 0.5 inch ☐ Present tense for discussing literature
☐ In-text citations in correct format

WORKS CITED: ☐ Starts on new page with header ☐ "Works Cited" centered ☐
Hanging indent for entries ☐ Double-spaced ☐ Alphabetical order ☐ Correct formatting for each source type

COMMON MLA ERRORS TO AVOID

☐ Creating a separate title page (not used in MLA) ☐ Using bold, italics, or underline on your title
☐ Including comma in parenthetical citations: (Smith, 45) ☐ Including "p." or "pp." in parenthetical citations: (Smith p. 45) ☐ Using "&" instead of "and" for multiple authors
☐ Forgetting to indent paragraphs ☐ Adding extra spaces between paragraphs ☐
Not continuing header on Works Cited page ☐ Using "Bibliography" instead of "Works Cited"
☐ Not using hanging indent for Works Cited ☐ Incorrect date format (should be Day Month Year)
☐ Not italicizing book/journal titles ☐ Forgetting quotation marks for article titles

QUICK TIPS

✓ Set up header first - saves time ✓ Use Tab key for paragraph indents ✓ Use hanging indent feature for Works Cited ✓ Present tense for discussing literature/film ✓ Past tense for describing historical events
✓ Proofread citations carefully ✓ Verify URLs work (and don't include https:// in Works Cited) ✓ Ask professor about preferences ✓ Keep MLA Handbook handy for unusual sources

This is a complete MLA 9th edition example. Always consult the *MLA Handbook* (9th ed.) for comprehensive guidelines or unusual citation situations.