

Writing Design

By Elia Kazan

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CONTENTS

Intro	1
Spacing	1
Line Spacing	2
Indenting	2
Text alignment	3
Margins	3
Font and Size	4
Headers and Footers	4
Sections	4
Orphans and Widows (loose ends)	5
Viewing	5
Other Notes	5

INTRO

Formatting and presenting text is never random. There are several key choices, and this article explains your options.

MLA, APA, and Chicago style (referred to here as “standard style guides”) are used in academic settings. They all require Times New Roman font, 12-point font size, double-spaced text, one-inch margins. This “formula” has become the standard, default, bread-and-butter formatting of student papers, and is seen in K-12, college, and even graduate school. It’s functional, legible, and easy-to-remember.

Note that APA’s most recent edition has expanded font and size to include: 11-point Georgia, 12-point Aptos, 11-point Arial, and 11-point Calibri. Times New Roman and Georgia are called serif fonts because the ends of the letters are scripted or curved. Aptos, Arial, and Calibri are called non-serif because the ends of the letters are straight.

Most academic professors ask that their students follow one of the standard style guides. Note however that professors and teachers absolutely have the authority to request specific formatting requirements. Some may want you to submit single-spaced or 1.5 spaced. Some prefer 11 or 13 size font. Some prefer 0.5 inch indents, others request 0.35 inch. It’s best to ask.

Note that professional publications, including physical books, online news companies, journals, and magazines do not follow MLA, APA, and Chicago style. They have their own stylistic preferences. Firstly, they aren’t printing text on 8.5 by 11 inch paper, and submitting that to be graded by a professor. They are either publishing on unique paper dimensions or on screen, so their choice in font, line spacing, margins, etc. are going to be unique.

The formatting categories are: spacing, line spacing, indenting, text alignment, margins, font and size, and headers and footers.

SPACING

This is the spacing between paragraphs. Ideally, the spacing here should be set at 0 pt for After and 0 pt for before. To set this, highlight the text you wish to work with, right-click, select Paragraph. Find the Spacing section, and set those numbers.

If you are creating a bullet point list, you actually want to set the After to 4, 6, 8, or 10 point, to give the points breathing room. A one-space separation, or 12 point, is too large.

LINE SPACING

Standard style guides require double-spacing.

For my class, I am requesting that you use single-space for the heading and title. Please be sure to add two or three blank lines before and after the title, giving it breathing room.

To set line spacing, highlight the text you wish to work with, right-click and select Paragraph. Find the Spacing section, go to Line Spacing, then click Multiple and input 2.0. You could also select double. But I want you to see how you can adjust it precisely.

When it comes to book publishing, publishers work with Exactly and set the point at the exact number they wish. This could be 12, 14, 18.5, you name it. It really just depends on the preferred amount of breathing room between lines. In book publishing, you ideally want it above 12 or 12.5, since squashed together lines aren't legible.

INDENTING

The standard style guides recommend 0.5 inch. I personally request students use 0.35, 0.4, or 0.45.

To set this, highlight all the text you wish to work with, right-click, then select paragraph. Go to the Indentation section. Go to Special, click the drop-down, then select First Line. Set it.

In professional book and magazine publishing, they rarely use such large indents. Depending on paper and font size, they might use somewhere between 0.15–0.30 inch.

For standard style guides, the very first paragraph of a chapter, section, or any text that immediately follows a major heading is indented by 0.5. I allow my students to not indent this if they wish. Most book publishers do not indent the first paragraph.

TEXT ALIGNMENT

Standard style guides require left-alignment (or Align Left) because ragged-right edges prevent uneven word spacing and make the text easier to read (apparently). For this course, please align left.

Justified text is often perceived as "more formal" because it mimics printed books: however, standard style guides discourage it for student manuscripts because to make both margins line up evenly, this stretches or squeezes spaces between words and can create distracting white vertical gaps (often called "rivers") that disrupt the flow of reading and look unprofessional.

Fun fact: cover letters, resumes, and business correspondences should also be aligned left.

Note that book publishers absolutely use justify.

If you justify, to avoid rivering, essentially you want to turn on hyphenation. And, delete Nonbreaking Spaces: to do this, highlight all text, press control or command plus f, go to Advance Find & Replace. Select the Find what box, then look at the bottom of the Find and Replace window and look for Find then the dropdown Special. Select Nonbreaking Space. Then, in the Replace with box, enter a regular space. Then, select Replace All.

The only terms that should be centered are the title and the Works Cited (if there is one). For APA, they also recommend centering major section headings.

Interestingly, according to the standard style guides, the title on student manuscripts should be centered but not bolded, italicized, nor in Small or All caps. It should be in regular text, the same font and size as your body text, and centered. Of course, if the title includes the name of a proper noun, (book, play, poem, film, television show, newspaper, magazine, website, work of art like a painting, or the name of a ships, trains, and aircraft), that noun gets italicized. For example, an essay titled: Analyzing Imagery in *The Great Gatsby*.

MARGINS

Standard style guides require 1-inch margins. For this course, you may choose whichever margin size you wish. I personally prefer slightly larger margins, as in somewhere between 1.1–1.25 on left and right. I think keeping one-inch margins at top and bottom of an 8.5 by 11 paper makes sense.

FONT AND SIZE

For my course, font choice and size is up to you, but make sure it is legible.

HEADERS AND FOOTERS

You may put the page number in the header or footer, as you wish.

Note, the heading (Name, Date, Professor) is required and should commence the first line of your text.

SECTIONS

If you are creating sections for an academic paper or a book, AVOID having a section start at the end of a paper. It looks unprofessional, unpolished, and it doesn't make sense to have a new section with one or two lines start at the end. Just push it over and start that next section on the next page.

If you want to create headings with a unique format (like Small caps or All caps), Word has a banner option up top on the Home section where you can set Headings. This achieves doing things in bulk, making the process seamless. You will see here how my section headings use Small caps: First letter is largest, subsequent letters are still all-caps but they are smaller in size. All caps is just all caps with the same letter size throughout. I think Small caps is a little more discreet but you do you.

To set this: select Heading 1, right-click, then select Modify. Make the settings how you want it. On that window, go up top to Advance, then to expanded, and you can give it more breathing room between the letters using 1.0 point or 0.7 pt for example.

This style will be your Heading 1 and you can simply select text and click Heading 1, which will adjust the header/subheader text immediately. This is much quicker than formatting each and every header/subheader text which would be a tedious headache.

ORPHANS AND WIDOWS (LOOSE ENDS)

In typesetting and publishing, orphan control is the automated or manual process of preventing a single line of text from becoming isolated at the top or bottom of a page or column.

While the terms are often used interchangeably, typography strictly distinguishes between orphans and widows:

1. Orphans vs. Widows

An Orphan: The first line of a new paragraph that appears isolated at the very bottom of a page or column, separated from the rest of its paragraph on the following page. (Memory trick: An orphan is left behind at the bottom.)

A Widow: The last line of a paragraph (or a single word) that gets pushed over to the very top of the next page or column all by itself. (Memory trick: A widow goes on alone at the top.)

unmanaged widows and orphans disrupt the visual vertical alignment of the page spread and break the reader's eye flow, making the interior look unbalanced.

VIEWING

While working, it can help tremendously to turn on , Multiple Pages viewing. Go to View, then select Multiple Pages. You can zoom in and out to find what works. That is for bigger-picture editing. When I revise text, I use One Page and focus there.

OTHER NOTES

Most formatting features are accessible in Google Docs or Apple Pages as well. But for this course, we require that you use Microsoft Word and submit .docx, not PDFs.

The pilcrow (¶) is a formatting sign shaped like a backward P with a double stem. Enabling it is essential for seeing "behind the scenes," so to speak. I only turn it on when I am editing, not when I am writing. It will reveal hidden spacing amounts, paragraph breaks, and manual measurements. Please familiarize yourself with this.

Selecting or highlighting a large amount of text: instead of highlighting and scrolling to select vast swaths of text (which can take quite a bit of time if it's

really long), you may simply do this: place your cursor at the very end of the text and click there. Then, scroll all the way up (if it's a large amount of text, use the sidebar). Place your cursor slightly before where you want to start, hold down the Shift key, then tap or click. That should highlight all that text, without the hassle of dragging a highlighter.

Use the numbered list feature. Makes the presentation polished. For example:

Amateur:

1. What are the most helpful things you've learned thus far in this class? What were the least helpful?
2. What kinds of activities have been most effective for you and why? (In-class writing activities, paired discussions, small group discussions, full group discussions, peer workshops, lectures, etc.) What kinds of activities have been the least effective for you and why?
3. What's one thing I, as the instructor, can do to help you be more successful in this class? What's one thing you can do to help you be more successful in this class?

Pro:

1. What are the most helpful things you've learned thus far in this class? What were the least helpful?
2. What kinds of activities have been most effective for you and why? (In-class writing activities, paired discussions, small group discussions, full group discussions, peer workshops, lectures, etc.) What kinds of activities have been the least effective for you and why?
3. What's one thing I, as the instructor, can do to help you be more successful in this class? What's one thing you can do to help you be more successful in this class?

Using your touchpad. Note that you can simply tap or touch most touchpads, you don't need to press and click. This may seem trivial, but after tens or hundreds of thousands of presses, it does reduce overall friction.

Scrolling. Personally, I set my touchpad so that when I move my fingers down, the page moves down (natural scrolling). The opposite is called "traditional scrolling," but you do you.

If you have any further questions on formatting, Gemini or ChatGPT are invaluable assistants.



About the Author

Elia Kazan is an author, publisher, scholar, and rap artist. For more information, visit his website eliakazanbooks.com

Colophon

This text uses Arial, size 13,
line spacing is set at exactly 16.5 points,
indented at 0.3 inch.

Spacing is 0 pt before and after paragraphs.

Text alignment is justified (with hyphenation turned on).

Margins are 1 inch top and bottom 1-inch,
and 1.25 inch left and right.