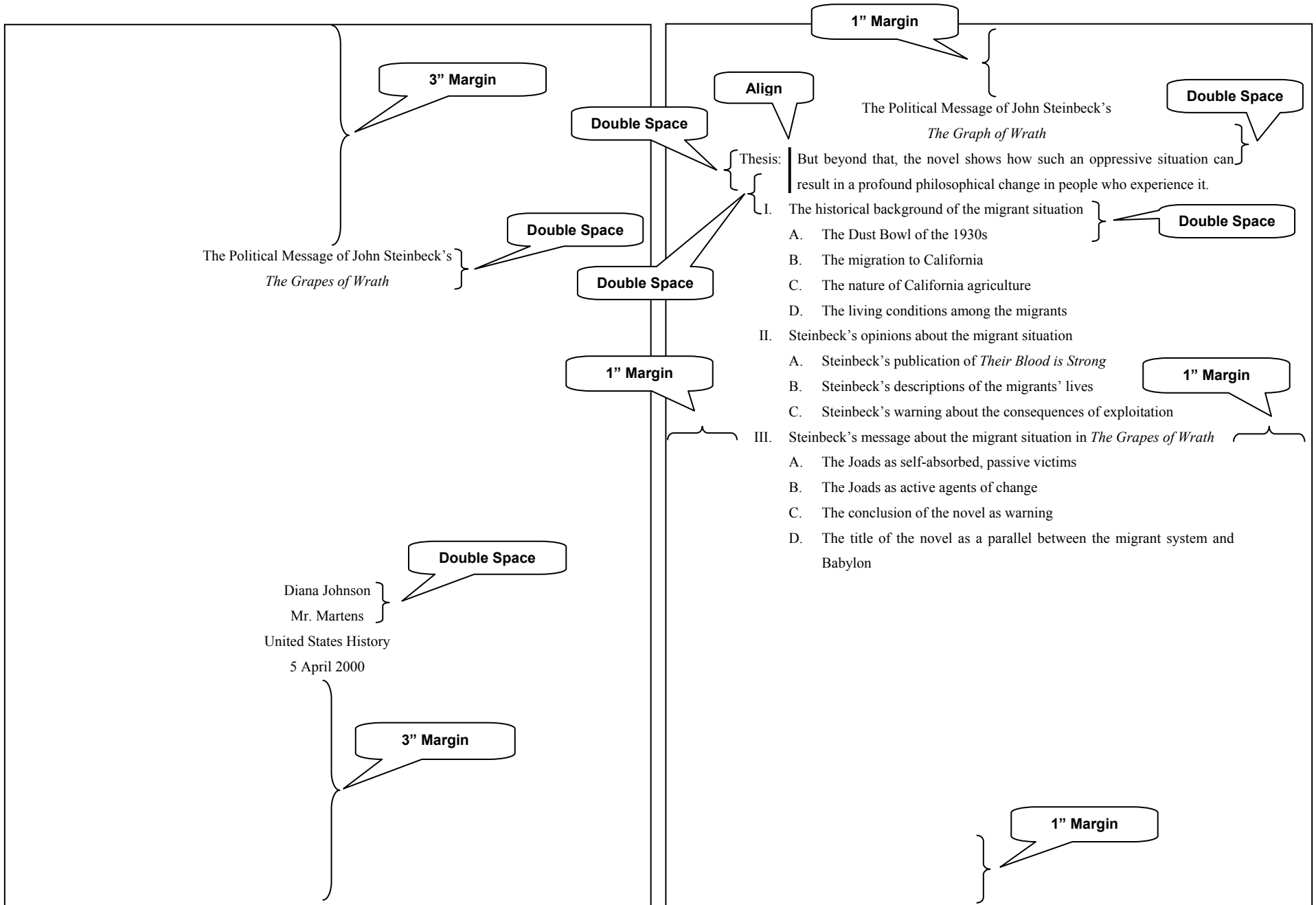
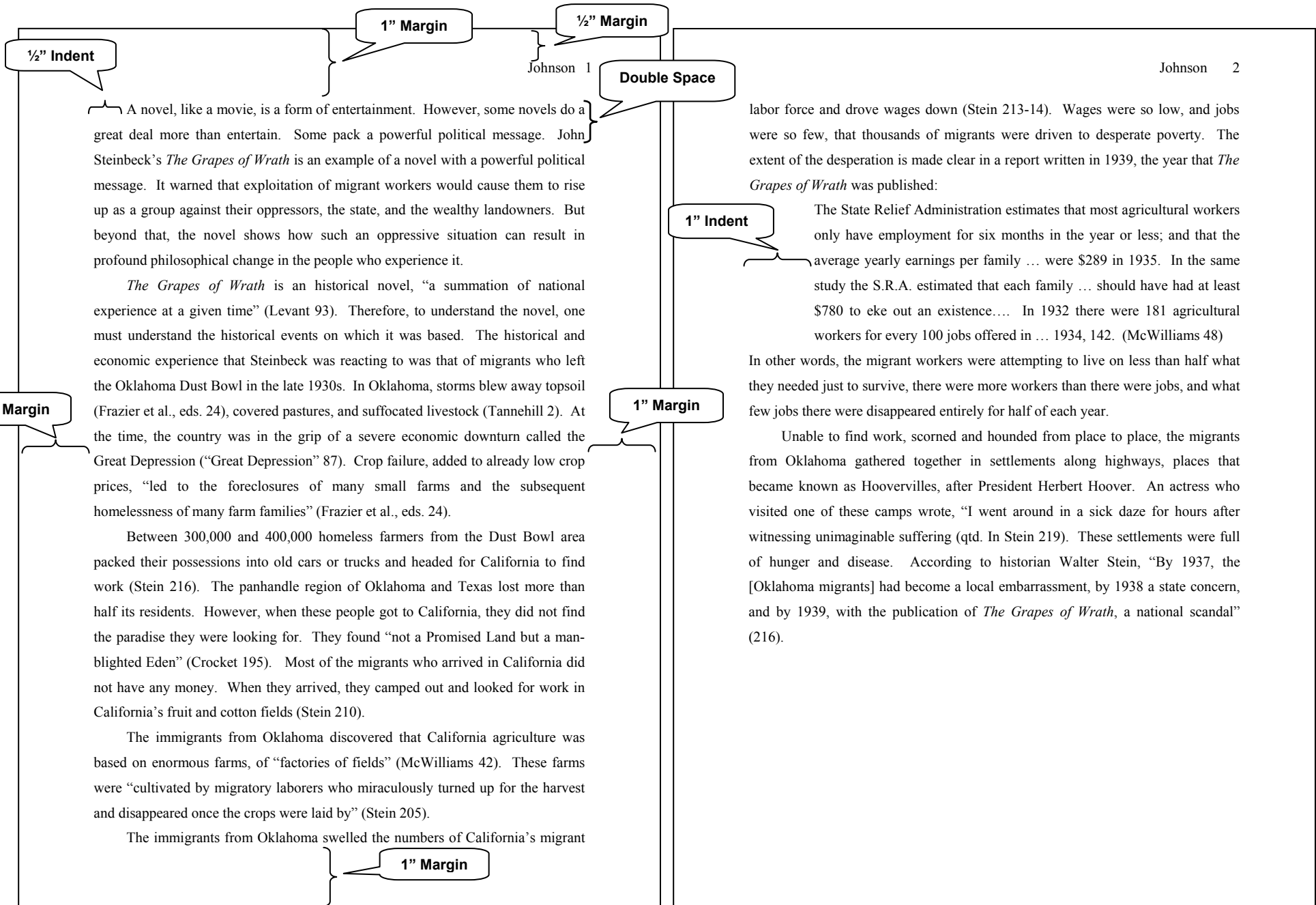


FORMATTING AN MLA RESEARCH PAPER





1/2" Indent

1" Margin

1/2" Margin

Johnson 1

Double Space

Johnson 2

A novel, like a movie, is a form of entertainment. However, some novels do a great deal more than entertain. Some pack a powerful political message. John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is an example of a novel with a powerful political message. It warned that exploitation of migrant workers would cause them to rise up as a group against their oppressors, the state, and the wealthy landowners. But beyond that, the novel shows how such an oppressive situation can result in profound philosophical change in the people who experience it.

The Grapes of Wrath is an historical novel, "a summation of national experience at a given time" (Levant 93). Therefore, to understand the novel, one must understand the historical events on which it was based. The historical and economic experience that Steinbeck was reacting to was that of migrants who left the Oklahoma Dust Bowl in the late 1930s. In Oklahoma, storms blew away topsoil (Frazier et al., eds. 24), covered pastures, and suffocated livestock (Tannehill 2). At the time, the country was in the grip of a severe economic downturn called the Great Depression ("Great Depression" 87). Crop failure, added to already low crop prices, "led to the foreclosures of many small farms and the subsequent homelessness of many farm families" (Frazier et al., eds. 24).

Between 300,000 and 400,000 homeless farmers from the Dust Bowl area packed their possessions into old cars or trucks and headed for California to find work (Stein 216). The panhandle region of Oklahoma and Texas lost more than half its residents. However, when these people got to California, they did not find the paradise they were looking for. They found "not a Promised Land but a man-blighted Eden" (Crocket 195). Most of the migrants who arrived in California did not have any money. When they arrived, they camped out and looked for work in California's fruit and cotton fields (Stein 210).

The immigrants from Oklahoma discovered that California agriculture was based on enormous farms, of "factories of fields" (McWilliams 42). These farms were "cultivated by migratory laborers who miraculously turned up for the harvest and disappeared once the crops were laid by" (Stein 205).

The immigrants from Oklahoma swelled the numbers of California's migrant

1" Margin

labor force and drove wages down (Stein 213-14). Wages were so low, and jobs were so few, that thousands of migrants were driven to desperate poverty. The extent of the desperation is made clear in a report written in 1939, the year that *The Grapes of Wrath* was published:

The State Relief Administration estimates that most agricultural workers only have employment for six months in the year or less; and that the average yearly earnings per family ... were \$289 in 1935. In the same study the S.R.A. estimated that each family ... should have had at least \$780 to eke out an existence.... In 1932 there were 181 agricultural workers for every 100 jobs offered in ... 1934, 142. (McWilliams 48)

In other words, the migrant workers were attempting to live on less than half what they needed just to survive, there were more workers than there were jobs, and what few jobs there were disappeared entirely for half of each year.

Unable to find work, scorned and hounded from place to place, the migrants from Oklahoma gathered together in settlements along highways, places that became known as Hoovervilles, after President Herbert Hoover. An actress who visited one of these camps wrote, "I went around in a sick daze for hours after witnessing unimaginable suffering (qtd. In Stein 219). These settlements were full of hunger and disease. According to historian Walter Stein, "By 1937, the [Oklahoma migrants] had become a local embarrassment, by 1938 a state concern, and by 1939, with the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*, a national scandal" (216).

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