

How to Use Footnotes in Research Papers

A *footnote* is a reference, explanation, or comment¹ placed below the main text on a printed page. Footnotes are identified in the text by a numeral or a symbol.

In research papers and reports, footnotes commonly acknowledge the sources of facts and quotations that appear in the text.

"Footnotes are the mark of a scholar," says Bryan A. Garner. "Overabundant, overflowing footnotes are the mark of an insecure scholar — often one who gets lost in the byways of analysis and who wants to show off" (*Garner's Modern American Usage*, 2009).

Examples and Observations

- "*Footnotes: vices*. In a work containing many long footnotes, it may be difficult to fit them onto the pages they pertain to, especially in an illustrated work."
- "**Content footnotes** supplement or simplify substantive information in the text; they should not include complicated, irrelevant, or nonessential information..."
"**Copyright permission footnotes** acknowledge the source of lengthy quotations, scale and test items, and figures and tables that have been reprinted or adapted."
- **Content Footnotes**
"What, after all, is a content footnote but material that one is either too lazy to integrate into the text or too reverent to discard? Reading a piece of prose that constantly dissolves into extended footnotes is profoundly disheartening. Hence my rule of thumb for footnotes is exactly the same as that for parentheses. One should regard them as symbols of failure. I hardly need to add that in this vale of tears failure is sometimes unavoidable."
- **Footnote Forms**
All notes have the same general form:¹ Adrian Johns. *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 623.
If you cite the same text again, you can shorten subsequent notes:⁵
Johns. *Nature of the Book*, 384-85.
- **The Disadvantages of Footnotes**
"More than one recent critic has pointed out that **footnotes** interrupt a narrative. References detract from the illusion of veracity and immediacy (Noel Coward made the same point more memorably when he remarked that having to read a footnote resembles having to go downstairs to answer the door while in the midst of making love.)"
- **Belloc on Footnotes**

"[L]et a man put his **foot-notes** in very small print indeed at the end of a volume, and, if necessary, let him give specimens rather than a complete list. For instance, let a man who writes history as it should be written — with all the physical details in evidence, the weather, the dress, colors, everything — write on for the pleasure of his reader and not for his critic. But let him take

sections here and there, and in an appendix show the critic how it is being done. Let him keep his notes and challenge criticism. I think he will be secure. He will not be secure from the anger of those who cannot write clearly, let alone vividly, and who have never in their lives been able to resurrect the past, but he will be secure from their destructive effect."

- **The Lighter Side of Footnotes**

"A **footnote** is like running downstairs to answer the doorbell on your wedding night."

¹ "The **footnote** has figured prominently in the fictions of such leading contemporary novelists as Nicholson Baker², David Foster Wallace³, and Dave Eggers. These writers have largely revived the digressive function of the footnote." (L. Douglas and A. George, *Sense and Nonsensibility: Lampoons of Learning and Literature*. Simon and Schuster, 2004)

² "[T]he great scholarly or anecdotal **footnotes** of Lecky, Gibbon, or Boswell, written by the author of the book himself to supplement, or even correct over several later editions, what he says in the primary text, are reassurances that the pursuit of truth doesn't have clear outer boundaries: it doesn't end with the book; restatement and self-disagreement and the enveloping sea of referenced authorities all continue. Footnotes are the finer-suckered surfaces that allow tentacular paragraphs to hold fast to the wider reality of the library." (Nicholson Baker, *The Mezzanine*. Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1988)

³ "One of the odd pleasures in reading the work of the late David Foster Wallace is the opportunity to escape from the main text to explore epic **footnotes**, always rendered at the bottoms of pages in thickets of tiny type." (Roy Peter Clark, *The Glamour of Grammar*. Little, Brown, 2010)

Sources

- Hilaire Belloc, *On*, 1923
- *Chicago Manual of Style*, University of Chicago Press, 2003
- Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History*. Harvard University Press, 1999.
- *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 6th ed., 2010.
- Paul Robinson, "The Philosophy of Punctuation." *Opera, Sex, and Other Vital Matters*. University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- Kate Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 7th ed. University of Chicago Press, 2007.