

The Art of the Footnote

The footnote marks the trail of the author through the woods of research. To use another metaphor, it is to hard copy what “windows” are on a computer screen. In each way, the footnote lets the writer give important or interesting information to the reader and lets the reader retrace the trail of the author. As the text displays the product of research, the footnote charts the process of research.

The footnote is superior to *parenthetical citation* because it does not interrupt the reader’s attention by clogging the flow of the text. And it is superior to the *endnote* because it puts references at the drop of an eye if the reader wishes. The small subscript numerical indicating the footnote is an unobtrusive signal to the serious reader, yet not an obstruction in the path of the casual reader.

A. Classification of Footnotes

a. Documentary and Referential

For publishing information. These garden-variety footnotes simply specify the complete and exact publication data of a title or author of a work mentioned in the text.

For bibliography. These point you reader to books, articles, lectures, films, etc. that deepen understanding of a reference in your text. They show the depth and range of your learning and your concern for the reader’s enlightenment. Here again, all of the publication data must be complete and exact.

For textual cross reference. In longer papers these notes refer the reader to the specific section where a subject is treated.

For acknowledgements. In these notes, authors cite professors or colleagues who have given them special instruction or encouragement.

b. Substantive and Informational

For history. These notes fill in historical backgrounds or definitions with which your reader may not be familiar.

For biography. Biographical footnotes identify people or characters you mention whose life facts would bog down your text. They may also include citations of biographies of those people.

For geography. Geographical notes locate and describe places that may be unfamiliar to your reader.

For methodology. These notes describe the methods used, for example in a statistical survey.

For objects. These kinds of notes describe or explain objects, customs, or practices that may be unfamiliar to the reader. They might also cite books and articles on those subjects.

For information on a secondary topic. These footnotes point your reader to explanations and sources of topics in your text that are interesting but not crucial to your thesis.

For etymologies and unusual words or expressions. These footnotes define and exemplify words with which your reader may not be familiar.

For contrasting views. Footnotes are helpful in laying out conflicting views of a subject. These notes bring your reader into the vital debates that often characterize scholarship and science.

For asides and commentaries. Always kept to a minimum, these footnotes address the reader directly, usually commenting ironically or humorously on an issue in your text.

For translations from another language. These footnotes construe foreign quotations into English.

Hahn, George. Towson University. British Literature since 1798. [The Art of the Footnote](#). 2005.

An extension and revision of Francis A. Burkle-Young and Sandra Rose Maley, *The Art of the Footnote: The Intelligent Student's Guide to the Art and Science of Annotating Texts* (Lanham, Md.: UP of America, 1996). See also Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997).