FOOTNOTES: A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED

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BASIC QUESTION: WHY ARE FOOTNOTES NECESSARY?

Footnotes are provided for any or all of the following reasons:

TO GIVE THE SOURCE OF A STATEMENT, STATISTIC OR QUOTATION WHOSE ACCURACY OR AUTHENTICITY THE READER MAY WISH TO VERIFY.

Statements of obvious fact on which all authors seem to agree need not normally be footnoted. But a statement, statistic, quotation or other item which appears only in a single source must be footnoted.

TO HELP THE READER LOCATE A SOURCE HE OR SHE MAY WISH TO CONSULT IN ORDER TO OBTAIN FURTHER INFORMATION ON THE SUBJECT.

Often the reader wants to check your source not because it seems dubious but because it seems interesting. A footnote helps the reader track down the information.

TO SHOW THAT A SENTENCE OR SIGNIFICANT PHRASE WAS WRITTEN NOT BY YOU BUT BY SOMEBODY ELSE.

If the wording of a sentence or an extended phrase in your paper is exactly like that of your source, it is a direct quotation: it should be put in quotation marks and a footnote should be provided. If the wording of a sentence or an extended phrase in your paper is similar to that of your source, but not exactly the same, it is a paraphrase: it should not be put in quotation marks, but it must still be footnoted. Remember: BOTH QUOTATIONS AND PARAPHRASES MUST BE PROPERLY FOOTNOTED.

WHY SHOULD I PROVIDE FOOTNOTES WHEN MANY OF THE BOOKS I READ DO NOT?

Many of the books you may read and use, particularly textbooks of a general character, do not provide footnotes. This is generally because they are written by eminent scholars who are well-known experts in their fields and whose authority to make the statements they make is widely recognized. Until and unless you become recognized as an eminent scholar, you must follow the standard rules which require that you provide footnotes for the material you use. These are the rules which scholars follow most of the time, especially when they are writing books and articles of a non-general character. They follow these rules for the three reasons given above, and so should you.
IS THERE A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FOOTNOTES AND ENDTNOTES?

Not really. Footnotes appear at the bottom of the page. Endnotes appear all grouped together at the end of the paper. Their actual purpose, function and style are the same either way. This Guide treats "footnotes" and "endnotes" as synonyms.

HOW MANY FOOTNOTES SHOULD I PROVIDE?

This is one of the most difficult questions to answer. It is recognized that students may make minor errors in judgment in deciding whether or not a particular statement requires a footnote. But the basic rules are clear. Remember, it is not necessary to provide footnotes for statements of undisputed fact ("Napoleon Bonaparte was born on the island of Corsica in 1769"). Nor is it necessary to provide footnotes for very broad generalizations which you have arrived at on the basis of consulting numerous sources ("Napoleon had a very complex personality"). But it is necessary to provide footnotes for the reasons and in the circumstances listed under headings 1 to 3 above. By and large, when in doubt it is safer to provide too many footnotes than too few.

WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT TO GIVE EXACT PUBLICATION DATA IN A FOOTNOTE?

The purpose of a footnote is to help the reader locate the exact book or article you used. The more precisely the publication data are provided, the more efficiently the book or journal can be located. Many books are published in different versions or editions, or in translations. In such cases, you must give sufficient information to show the reader which edition or translation you used.

DO I HAVE TO GIVE ALL THIS INFORMATION EACH TIME I CITE THE SAME SOURCE?

Certainly not! You only have to give the full publication data the first time you cite that source in a footnote. After that, you can refer to that source in an abbreviated form. For example, if a footnote refers to the same source as is cited in the immediately preceding footnote, simply write "ibid." (Latin for: in the same place) followed by the relevant page number. If referring to a source mentioned in some earlier footnote, simply give the author's name and a short version of the title, followed by the relevant page number.

WHAT IF I USE A BOOK WHICH HAS CHAPTERS OR SELECTIONS BY MANY AUTHORS?

Keep in mind that the reader normally wants to know the author and the title of the particular passage or selection you used as well as the editor and title of the whole collection. So your first reference must give the author and title of the particular article or chapter you are citing as well as the usual information for the book as a whole. (See example "e" below) Subsequent references to that article or chapter can just give the author and title (in short form) and the page number.
WHAT IF I AM QUOTING FROM SOMETHING LIKE THE BIBLE OR SHAKESPEARE?

Some classics of world literature have been published in so many editions that it may be more convenient for the reader to check an edition he or she has handy than to track down the particular edition you used. In a case like that, it is generally more useful to cite the passage by some method applicable to all versions, such as chapter and verse, or act and scene number. Still, the first reference to that work should indicate the particular version you consulted, just in case the reader does find it necessary to locate that edition.

WHAT ABOUT NON-PRINT SOURCES LIKE THE INTERNET?

All sources you use should be properly cited. As you know, Internet sites should be used with caution as sources of historical information, but some sites can be useful. If you use an Internet site, give the best possible description of the authorship and name of the site as well as the exact URL and (because the content of a site can change from day to day) the date on which you accessed it. Likewise, if you use material from a CD-ROM or a video, give the most precise information you can about the title, author or producer, publisher or distributor and date of the material.

SUPPOSE THE SOURCE I AM USING CITES ANOTHER SOURCE: WHICH ONE DO I CITE?

Always cite the source from which you actually obtained the information. If the book or article you used shows that some material actually came from an earlier source, you may want to show what that original source was. But if so, you must add the phrase "as cited by" or "as quoted by" and show the exact source from which you actually got the information. The footnote might look like this:


In most cases the reference to the original source is not even necessary as long as you show what page(s) of what book or article you actually got the material from. The footnote could look like this:


WHAT ABOUT PICTURES OR GRAPHICS?

Just follow the basic rule. If your paper includes any illustrations or graphic material copied from a book, article, web site or the like, give the exact source from which you copied that material.
WHERE DO THE FOOTNOTES GO?

The reference to the footnote is made with a raised number at the end of the relevant sentence or passage in your text. As for the footnotes themselves, it is usually more convenient for the reader to find them at the bottom of the page. But it may be more convenient for you to group all the footnotes together at the end of the paper as endnotes, and this is almost always considered acceptable.

FINALLY: WHICH STYLE OF FOOTNOTING SHOULD BE USED?

There are many different styles of footnoting. Many scholars use the so-called MLA or APA styles. However, most historians prefer the "humanistic" or "Chicago" style, because it avoids cluttering up the text with long notes in parentheses. The style used in the examples on the following page is the "Chicago" style most commonly used by historians in North America. It is the style you should normally use for history papers.

The main exception would occur when you are writing a paper based entirely on a single source, as for example in a book review. In that case you might give the full bibliographical information in a heading at the beginning of the paper and supply the page references in parentheses in the text of your paper, like this: (p. 3).

EXAMPLES OF STANDARD FOOTNOTE STYLE

Standard entry:


Translated book:


Particular edition of a book:


Article or chapter within a book containing chapters or contributions by many authors:

Article in a journal:


Typical sequence of footnotes in which a work is cited more than once:


...AND BY THE WAY, WHAT ABOUT BIBLIOGRAPHIES?

Most essays and papers that you are likely to write will also require a bibliography listing the books and articles you have consulted. Normally a bibliography lists all the books and articles in alphabetical order according to the authors’ last names. In the case of articles, give the page number of the whole article. Some examples are given below.

EXAMPLES OF STANDARD BIBLIOGRAPHY STYLE


