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Research Tools > Using Footnotes

Consider the lowly footnote. It lives at the bottom of the page, in tiny print. Its very name suggests insignificance: when a fact comes to be seen as trivial, people say it has "become a footnote." Footnotes are the Rodney Dangerfields of academic writing - they get no respect!

But footnotes really are worthy of respect. Footnoting is a great way to give credit to the people whose ideas you respect so much that you've chosen to use them in your report. There are several reasons why you should use footnotes regularly:

Footnoting is a courtesy you extend to your fellow writers.

Authors appreciate it when people cite their works in footnotes. Think of it this way: if somebody used your ideas in a paper, you'd want them to acknowledge you. So, when you use somebody else's idea, acknowledge them!

Footnoting lends credibility to your report.

When you cite readers to an authoritative source, some of that source's authority rubs off on your paper! Plus, readers are assured that you've done your homework when you cite credible sources in footnotes.

Footnoting safeguards you against accusations of plagiarism.

Nobody wants to be called a cheat. But if you use somebody else's ideas, and you neglect to give them credit, you could be accused of plagiarism. Plagiarism is a form of cheating.

When to footnote

In general, whenever you use somebody else's ideas or facts in your report, you should provide a footnote that identifies the source of the information you're using. For example, when you use published statistical information, such as the U.S. Commerce Department's 1997 Gross Domestic Product figures, always footnote the source of the data. Similarly, whenever you use a direct quote, or lift portions of text word-for-word from a published work, always footnote the source of the quote.

When you paraphrase an idea you found in somebody else's published work, it's considered good practice to footnote this as well. Even when you rework someone else's idea, it's a good idea to cite the source of the original idea. But don't footnote something that's accepted as "common knowledge." Footnote new ideas, not familiar ones.

How to Footnote

There are two main footnoting formats you should know about:

- The [Oxford style](#), also known as the traditional style.
- The [Harvard style](#), which is sometimes referred to as the modern style.

Oxford style

When you use the more formal Oxford footnote format, you provide a numbered footnote for every source you cite. This numbered footnote appears in the text of your paper as a superscript number, eg ¹. You put a ¹ immediately above the text of your first footnote, a ² above the next one, etc. In the classic Oxford style, the footnote information appears on the same page, down at the bottom. However, some readers prefer the endnote style, in which all of the notes appear at the end of your paper. Your teacher will tell you which method to use.

Whether you use footnotes or endnotes, the basic information you put in each note is the same. It's called a *citation*. A citation is nothing more than a pointer to the source. A citation provides the reader with enough information to look up the source and verify it. The exact citation form is determined by the kind of source you're citing, as shown in the table below:

Table 1: Traditional Citation Form

Source	Format	Example
Books (with named authors)	Author's last name, initials, <i>title</i> , publisher, year published, page number.	1. Doe, J., <i>We're Stylin'</i> , Oxford University Press, 1995, page 86.
Books (by editors)	<i>Title</i> , editor's initials and last name, publisher, year published, page number.	2. <i>We're Stylin'</i> , Edited by J. Doe, Oxford University Press, 1995, page 34.
Chapter (in a book)	Author's last name, initials, "article title," author or editor's initials and last name, <i>book title</i> , publisher, year published, page number.	3. Wilson, B., "Good Citations," in J. Doe's <i>We're Stylin'</i> , Oxford University Press, 1995, page 68.
Article (in a periodical)	Author's last name, initials, "article title," <i>periodical title</i> , volume, number, year published, page number.	4. Wilson, B., "Good Citations," <i>Style Quarterly</i> , Volume IX, Number 3, 1995, page 102.
Web page (or other electronic source)	Author's last name, initials, "page title," URL, date of site visit.	5. Wilson, B., "Good Citations," http://www.domain.com/style.html , March 15, 1998.

Repeated Citations of the Same Source

The first time you cite a certain source, you have to make a complete citation, according to the rules in Table 1 above. But if you cite that same source later on in your paper, you don't have to type out the full citation all over again. The traditional Oxford style provides three shortcuts you can use instead. These shortcuts are abbreviations derived from Latin: *ibid.*, *op. cit.*, and *loc. cit.* Who says Latin's a dead language?

Consult Table 2 below to see how to use these citation shortcuts:

Table 2: Footnote Shortcuts

Rule	Example
Always provide a full citation the first time you refer to a source in a footnote.	1. Doe, J., <i>We're Stylin'</i> , Oxford University Press, 1995, page 86.
If the very next reference is to a different page in the same source, use the <i>ibid.</i> shortcut.	2. <i>ibid.</i> , page 105.
To refer to a work cited in a previous footnote that isn't immediately preceding, use the <i>op. cit.</i> shortcut.	3. Doe, <i>op. cit.</i> , page 255.
To refer to the same page of a work cited in a previous footnote, use the <i>loc. cit.</i> shortcut.	4. Doe, <i>loc. cit.</i>

Remember: you can't use *ibid.* unless it's immediately below a full citation. Whenever you can't use *ibid.*, it's usually best to use the author's name followed by *op. cit.* and the page number.

Harvard Style

The Harvard citation format differs from the Oxford style in several important ways. To begin with, it's not strictly a footnoting style at all. Instead of putting little numbers in the text to signify a citation, the Harvard format uses parentheses. When citing a source in the Harvard style, simply put the author's name, publication date, and page number in parentheses directly in the text of your paper. There's no footnote at the bottom of the page; instead, the reader looks up citation in the bibliography at the back of your paper. The format for a Harvard style citation is: (author's last name, author's initials, publication year:page number).

Here's how the five citations in Table 1 would look in the Harvard style:

(Doe, J., 1995a:86)
 (Doe, J., 1995b:34)
 (Wilson, B., 1995a:68)
 (Wilson, B., 1995b:102)
 (Wilson, B., 1995c)

Here's how the sources cited above would appear in the bibliography:

Doe, J. 1995a, *We're Stylin'*, Oxford University Press, London.
 Doe, J. 1995b, *We're Stylin'*, Oxford University Press, London.
 Wilson, B. 1995a, 'Good Citations,' in Doe, J. (Ed.) *We're Stylin'*, Oxford University Press,

London, pp. 68-100.

Wilson, B. 1995b, 'Good Citations,' *Style Quarterly*, Volume IX, Number 3, pp. 102-130.

Wilson, B. 1995c, 'Good Citations,' <http://www.domain.com/style.html>, March 15, 1998.

Notice that, in the Harvard style, there's a special rule for works by the same author published in the same year: you have to add a letter after the year. The purpose of this letter is to ensure that readers can keep track of which source you're citing. Follow alphabetical order when adding letters to the publication year.

Examples

Below are identical excerpts from a paper about footnoting. The excerpt on the left has Oxford style footnotes, while the one on the right uses the Harvard format.

Oxford	Harvard
<p>Before the creation of the footnote, scholars had no systematic way to reassure readers that the information in their papers was reliable and verifiable. Someone might claim in a paper that "The world's population will double by 2050," but writers knew that most readers would ask, "According to whom?" Some writers simply expected readers to accept their claims on faith, but most writers knew that readers needed verification. So writers began citing sources to back up their claims, but they did so directly in the body of their papers. This had a negative impact on readability.</p> <p>Sometime in the 17th century, scholars developed the footnote as a means of reassuring readers that the information in their papers was reliable.¹ The practice spread rapidly. By the late 19th century, footnotes had become so commonplace in academic writing that it was rare to encounter a published work that lacked them.</p> <p>But the footnote soon became a victim of its own success. Readers began to complain that scholars were afraid to be original. Too many academic writers seemed to be using footnotes as tiny badges of honor, intended to prove to the world how well-read and well-informed they were. As Kenneth Woodward puts it, "To be sure, footnotes may sometimes strike the reader as mere display of intellectual vanity." (Woodward, K.L., 1996) But Woodward and other footnote advocates reject the view that modern</p>	<p>Before the creation of the footnote, scholars had no systematic way to reassure readers that the information in their papers was reliable and verifiable. Someone might claim in a paper that "The world's population will double by 2050," but writers knew that most readers would ask, "According to whom?" Some writers simply expected readers to accept their claims on faith, but most writers knew that readers needed verification. So writers began citing sources to back up their claims, but they did so directly in the body of their papers. This had a negative impact on readability.</p> <p>Sometime in the 17th century, scholars developed the footnote as a means of reassuring readers that the information in their papers was reliable. (Gibbon, E., 1997:6) The practice spread rapidly. By the late 19th century, footnotes had become so commonplace in academic writing that it was rare to encounter a published work that lacked them.</p> <p>But the footnote soon became a victim of its own success. Readers began to complain that scholars were afraid to be original. Too many academic writers seemed to be using footnotes as tiny badges of honor, intended to prove to the world how well-read and well-informed they were. As Kenneth Woodward puts it, "To be sure, footnotes may sometimes strike the reader as mere display of intellectual vanity." (Woodward, K.L., 1996) But Woodward and other footnote advocates reject the view that modern</p>

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1. Gibbon, E., *The Footnote: A Curious History*, page 6.
2. Woodward, K.L., "In Praise of Footnotes," *Newsweek*, Volume 128, Number 11, page 75.
3. Woodward, *loc. cit.*

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