

Stylish Academic Writing

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HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England

- To fine-tune your structure, make a paragraph outline. First, identify the topic sentence of each paragraph (that is, the sentence that most clearly states its overall argument); next, arrange those sentences in a numbered sequence. This process can help you identify structural weaknesses both within and between paragraphs: for example, a paragraph that has no clearly stated argument or one that does not logically build on the one before.

CHAPTER 12

POINTS OF REFERENCE

What do citation styles have to do with stylishness? Everything. How we cite influences how we write, from the minutiae of bibliographic forms to the big picture of how we respond to and acknowledge other people's work. Academic authors do no favors to themselves or their readers if they neglect to give credit where credit is due. At the same time, however, a book or article weighed down by awkwardly placed parenthetical citations and ponderous footnotes will probably be less readable, less engaging, and ultimately less persuasive than a piece of writing that wears its scholarly apparatus lightly.

Many commentators have noted the powerful role of citation styles in reinforcing disciplinary epistemologies. All kinds of methodological prejudices lurk just below the surface of any academic text; when we disrupt normative elements such as citation styles, we send those unspoken assumptions scurrying out into the light. Frances Kelly, a literary scholar turned educational researcher, recalls the challenges she faced when she first had to write a paper using APA style (sanctioned by the American Psychological Association) rather than MLA style (sanctioned by the Modern Language Association):

The first real difficulty arose when I attempted to discuss an article produced by a team of researchers working in collaboration. . . .

Here is a sentence lifted from a draft of the first paper I wrote for a Higher Education conference: "Collins, Rendle-Short, Jowan, Curnow, and Liddicoat (2001) make a similar point to Morris in their call for a new postgraduate pedagogy that takes the broader picture into account (p. 123)." . . . What had been a conversational element of my writing style now seemed decidedly clumsy.¹

Accustomed to citing authors' first names (which personalizes them), to knowing their gender (which contextualizes them), and to quoting their words directly (which privileges the opinions and experiences of individuals over disembodied assertions of fact), Kelly realized that she was trying to impose an "author prominent" way of thinking on a citation style that favors "information prominent" statements instead. Not only did she have to play down the role of academic authors as shapers of knowledge, but she also had to relinquish her habit of quoting the full titles of the books and articles she cited: "This was perhaps the most irksome of the changes I had to make to my writing because it struck at the very base of my disciplinary training and my sense of purpose (and even identity); if I wasn't discussing the texts, what was I doing?"

For some academics, the disciplinary assumptions imposed by particular citation styles are the whole point of the exercise. In an article aimed at teachers of undergraduate psychology courses, psychologists Robert Madigan, Susan Johnson, and Patricia Linton approvingly observe that APA style "encapsulates the core values and epistemology" of their discipline. Through mastery of the citational process, they argue, psychology students learn to recast a "complex human story" as a "sanitized, rationalized account of the research"; to challenge other researchers' findings by focusing on "empirical details rather than personalities"; to buffer their conclusions with hedging words such as *tend*, *suggest*, and *may*; to cite other authors by paraphrasing their arguments rather than quoting them directly; and to regard language not as a complex medium but as a "somewhat

unimportant container for information about phenomena, data, and theories." Exposure to APA-style writing, the authors conclude, "can only help define for students the discipline of psychology and encourage the development of intellectual values that are typical of the discipline. A successful student comes not only to write like a psychologist but to think like one as well."²

Other scholars, however, offer a more cautious and critical view of the relationship between citation styles and intellectual empowerment. Rhetorician Robert J. Connors notes that parenthetical citation styles "relegate issues of readability and prose style to tertiary importance" and elevate "instruction" over "delight." Similarly, poet and literary critic Charles Bernstein warns that institutional prescriptions encourage authors to adopt a linear, univocal, straitjacketed prose style characterized by "frame lock, and its cousin tone jam."³ Metaphors of containment, conformity, and even corsetry suffuse both authors' critiques: Connors documents how the rhetoric of citation systems has "silently undergirded the enterprise of Western intellectual activity," while Bernstein chastises the "generations of professional standard bearers and girdle makers" who inhibit originality by insisting on "appropriate scholarly decorum."⁴

Academic writers do indeed often chafe under the constriction of ill-fitting citation regimes; I remember my own frustration, years ago, at having to waste precious research time searching for an out-of-print edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style*, thanks to an obstinate editor who refused to update his journal's outmoded house style. However, I have never heard of an editor urging an author to add more and longer footnotes to an article or to cram yet another parenthetical citation into an already overloaded sentence. Although academics love to blame their own stylistic shortcomings on prescriptive gatekeepers, the responsibility for citing badly or well ultimately lies at their own front door. Even when authors cannot choose which citation style to use in a given publication, they can still choose *how* to use it.

SPOTLIGHT ON STYLE

PETER GOODRICH

In truth what we need, what is really missing, what science requires, what art desires but the law and economics types have overlooked, is a citation index exclusive to the asterisk footnote. It is here that you get the low-down. These are the references that need to be counted, ranked, listed, and tabulated. These are the veridical marks of community, the unexpurgated indicia of affiliations, the slips that signal the form of life, the motive and the militating purpose. [Excerpt from footnote]

Legal scholar Peter Goodrich takes satirical footnotes to a whole new level when, in the first of the 601 footnotes annotating his article "Satirical Legal Studies," he calls for a more rigorous referencing of references. Like any good satirist, Goodrich mixes humor with serious critique. With his insistently repeated *whats* ("In truth *what* we need, *what* is really missing, *what* science requires, *what* art desires"), his conspiratorial asides ("It is here that you get the lowdown"), his intentionally redundant vocabulary ("counted, ranked, listed, and tabulated"), and his over-the-top turns of phrase ("the veridical marks of community, the unexpurgated indicia of affiliations, the slips that signal the form of life"), he mocks not only the pedantry of the legal scholar but also the inflated rhetoric of the courtroom lawyer.

In his article, Goodrich catalogs numerous examples of legal satire, including a law review article in which the main text "literally falls into a footnote" and many other "gems . . . buried in the interstices of articles on the most somber of substantive doctrines." His 120-page article not only demonstrates his own mastery of the legal satire genre but, even more impressively, documents his nuanced understanding of the litigational and scholarly paradigms within which he and his colleagues operate.

In this book, in keeping with my publisher's preferences, I employ "*Chicago style*" endnotes, following the format specified in *The Chicago Manual of Style*. As an interdisciplinary scholar who also frequently works with the MLA and APA styles, I am well acquainted with both the pros and cons of the *Chicago style*, which consigns all bibliographic material to endnotes indicated in the main text by superscript numerals. On the plus side, *Chicago* endnotes are logical and compact; they sweep the text free of parenthetical obstructions and negate the need for a separate "Works Cited" section, as all of the relevant bibliographic information appears in the notes themselves. Whereas footnotes disrupt the flow of the text by drawing our eyes to the bottom of each page, endnotes remain discreetly discrete: readers do not have to consult them unless they want to. On the minus side, those ubiquitous little note numbers can function, in the words of architectural historian Lewis Mumford, like "barbed wire" maintaining a spiky distance between the readers and the text.⁵ In a book intended to reach a wide range of readers, endnotes and footnotes alike risk communicating at best a scholarly pretentiousness—"Let me show you how erudite I am"—and at worst a sort of fussy didacticism: "This text is far too difficult for you to understand on your own; please allow me to explain it to you."

Long discursive annotations, in particular, can hamper the narrative flow of an academic text, luring readers down distracting side paths when the author's main job is to get them from A to B. Not all academics would agree, however, that discursive notes are best avoided even in scholarly prose intended for specialist readers. Laurel Richardson lauds discursive notes as "a place for secondary arguments, novel conjectures, and related ideas"; Robert J. Connors calls them the "alleys, closes and mews" where authors abandon the "high street of the text" to pursue subversive arguments and analysis.⁶ These divergent opinions serve as a salient reminder that stylishness remains, in the end, a matter of personal taste: one reader's poison may turn out to be another's cup of tea.

Indeed, for many academics, footnotes and endnotes offer an unmowed corner of grass where they can let their proverbial hair down and run wild. Vladimir Nabokov exploited the satirical promise of the scholarly endnote in his novel *Pale Fire*, ostensibly an annotated edition of a long poem by the fictional poet John Shade, but in fact an autobiography cum murder mystery whose elaborate, paranoiac plot snakes through the voluminous notes allegedly penned by Charles Kinbote (also known as King Charles of Zembla), a former neighbor of the dead poet.⁷ Following Nabokov's example, stylish authors such as psychologist Michael Corballis and philosopher Ted Cohen have published academic books and articles that contain irreverent notes among the serious ones:

It appears that bats do not intentionally signal the presence of prey to other bats but simply adventitiously pick up echolocation signals from them. This rather suggests that bats do not possess theory of mind. I'm sorry you had to wait this long to learn about bats.⁸

My appreciation of *Chinatown*, and of many other things, owes much to Joel Snyder, one of the world's best conversational colleagues. It is difficult to find—and luck to have found—a friend who is very intelligent, highly critical, and also endlessly sympathetic. If the characters in *Chinatown* had friends like that, the movie would have a happy ending, and it would be a failure.⁹

Legal journals, in which footnotes frequently climb halfway up the pages or higher, provide a particularly fertile ground for satirists, including a law professor whose article on “Satirical Legal Studies” contains 601 footnotes (see “Spotlight on Style: Peter Goodrich”) and a group of law students whose tongue-in-cheek article on “The Common Law Origins of the Infield Fly Rule” footnotes the opening word “The.”¹⁰

In an absorbing book-length study of the footnote, historian Tony Grafton observes that footnotes “flourished most brightly in the eighteenth century, when they served to comment ironically on the narrative in the text as well as to support its veracity.”

SPOTLIGHT ON STYLE

ANTHONY GRAFTON

Like the high whine of the dentist's drill, the low rumble of the footnote on the historian's page reassures: the tedium it inflicts, like the pain inflicted by the drill, is not random but directed, part of the cost that the benefits of modern science and technology exact. . . . Historians for whom composing annotations has become second nature—like dentists who have become inured to inflicting pain and shedding blood—may hardly notice any more that they still extrude names of authors, titles of books, and numbers of folders in archives or leaves in unpublished manuscripts.

Historian Tony Grafton brings a stylish blend of erudition and humor to every topic he addresses, no matter how seemingly trivial or banal. In his book *The Footnote: A Curious History*, he provides numerous examples—some serious, some silly—of how scholars' arguments “stride forward or totter backward” on their footnotes:

- Like the shabby podium, carafe of water, and rambling, inaccurate introduction which assert that a particular person deserves to be listened to when giving a public lecture, footnotes confer authority on a writer.
- To the inexpert, footnotes look like deep root systems, solid and fixed; to the connoisseur, however, they reveal themselves as anthills, swarming with constructive and combative activity.
- Presumably the footnote's rise to high social, if not typographical, position took place when it became legitimate, after history and philology, its parents, finally married.

Pouring forth a bubbling stream of metaphors, analogies, and personifications, Grafton compares footnotes to podiums and water jugs (shabby markers of academic authority), to root systems and anthills (emblems of scholarly inertia and hyperactivity, respectively), and to an illegitimate child socially elevated by the parents' marriage. His own footnotes, however—ranging from terse source citations to lengthy tracts of German or Latin—are models of scholarly seriousness and decorum.

Unfortunately, many of the notes in academic books and articles today can be described neither as ironic commentaries nor as glittering rhetorical jewels:

I refer not to the named or to the unnamed but still blatant (at least to the literate Hebrew reader) citations, evocations of works ranging from a seventh-century liturgy by Eleazar Ben Kallir (11; 15) to a twentieth-century Romantic masterpiece, H. N. Bialik's "The Pond" ('הַבְּדִכְוָה'; 253; 229), but to some subtle echoes of the poetry of Israel's poet laureate, Natan Alterman (Hebrew ed., 16), unfortunately lost in translation. [Literary Studies endnote]

It seems natural if a common internalist posits a relation of instantiation (exemplification) and identifies it with U, or lets it play its ontological role (correspondingly, postulates relations of instantiation and identify them with, or lets them play the ontological roles of, U, U', U&", etc.). However, given that the problem of unity is not the problem of instantiation (cf. §2), this is an independent thesis and hence not an issue we need to consider. [Philosophy footnote]

As Grafton laments, pedantic notes such as these resemble "less the skilled work of a professional carrying out a precise function to a higher end than the offhand production and disposal of waste products."¹¹

Researchers in disciplines outside the humanities do not suffer as badly as their arts-based cohorts from the spilled sewage of excessive marginalia. Nor do they tend to indulge in overquotation, another tic of humanities scholars, whose respect for other writers' exact phraseology sometimes ties their own syntax up in knots:

As Lisa Cody has argued in relation to the "spectacle" of the man-midwife, the urgent need for reproduction removed generation from the exclusive realm of feminine expertise and resituated it as a category "of 'universal' and 'public' interest to 'men and women.'" [Literary Studies]

The parenthetical citation systems favored by scientists and social scientists, however, provide no better guarantee of syntactical

concision or stylistic hygiene than the note-based citation systems preferred in the arts. Madigan, Johnson, and Linton argue that, by encouraging authors to paraphrase rather than quote, APA style improves the "flow and feel of the resulting text."¹² Yet one could hardly argue that the following example "flows," except in the most disagreeable sense:

In contrast to the research using questionnaires and experience sampling methods, studies using emotional stimuli have found that individuals with schizophrenia show normal reports of affective experience, such that individuals with schizophrenia and control participants report similar patterns of valence and arousal in their self-report ratings of their experience of emotional stimuli (e.g., Berenbaum & Oltmanns, 1992; Crespo-Facorro et al., 2001; Curtis, Lebow, Lake, Katsanis, & Iacono, 1999; Hempel et al., 2005; Kring, Kerr, Smith, & Neale, 1993; Kring & Neale, 1996; Matthews & Barch, 2004; Moberg et al., 2003; Quirk, Strauss, & Sloan, 1998; Rupp et al., 2005; Schlenker, Cohen, & Hopmann, 1995), although some studies showed differences between individuals with schizophrenia and control participants in terms of absolute levels of experience for both positive and negative stimuli (Crespo-Facorro et al., 2001; Curtis et al., 1999; Moberg et al., 2003; Plailly, d'Amato, Saoud, & Royet, 2006; Quirk et al., 1998).

The authors of this psychology article have taken an already bloated sentence (seventy-seven words) and stuffed no fewer than sixteen separate citations (seventy-three words) into its distended belly. The main problem here, as in much academic writing, is that they are simply trying to pack too much detail—some essential, some peripheral—into a single sentence, rather than making each point separately. As a first step toward improvement, the authors could strip away redundancies: the words *studies*, *control participants*, and *individuals with schizophrenia* all appear at least twice in the sentence, and *experience* occurs four times. Next, they could break the sentence up into two or three shorter ones, each with relevant citations at the end. Finally, they could read the revised passage aloud to each other—including

the citations—and check for any phrases or interruptions that might trip up their readers.

Lengthy parenthetical citations violate, or at least risk violating, two key principles of stylish writing. First, they slow the text's momentum: how can you possibly tell a compelling research story if you have to stop and cough every few seconds? Second, much in the same way that discursive footnotes and endnotes lend themselves to eruptions of excessive erudition, parenthetical styles encourage extravagant but often meaningless name-dropping. Commentators ranging from legal scholar Steve Wise to historian David Henige to paleontologist Stephen K. Donovan have roundly criticized the scholarly practice—pervasive in the sciences and social sciences but virtually unheard of in the humanities—of citing articles, books, and even entire multivolume editions without designating specific page numbers.¹³ This tendency, Henige notes, turns on its head the disciplinary stereotype that “scientists are sceptical souls” while humanists are “more trusting and forgiving, more tuned in to the fallibilities of their fellows”:

Particularly disconcerting is the disconnect between this unconcern with precision in citation and the extraordinary care taken to assure that submitted papers measure up in other ways. For, unlike these other factors—experimental rigour, quantitative accuracy, logical consistency, attention to lists of references—it appears that authors' citational scrupulousness is simply taken for granted.¹⁴

In my census of source citations and footnotes in articles from ten academic disciplines, I found that the anthropologists cited on average seventy-five sources per paper, whereas the computer scientists cited only twenty-seven, even though articles in both disciplines tend to have similar page lengths (see Figure 2.2 in Chapter 2). Similarly, in an analysis of citation conventions in eight academic disciplines, sociolinguist Ken Hyland found that sociologists include on average 104 source citations per paper, whereas physicists cite only about twenty-five times per paper.

Hyland notes that scientists typically introduce citations using “research verbs” (*showed, observed, developed*), whereas philosophers favor “interpretive verbs” (*think, believe, overlook, fail*). Tellingly, whom to cite turns out to be as important a consideration for many researchers as how to cite. As one of Hyland's interview subjects, a sociologist, explains:

I've aligned myself with a particular camp and tend to cite people from there. Partly because I've been influenced by those ideas and partly because I want them to read my work. It's a kind of code, showing where I am on the spectrum. Where I stand.¹⁵

In a separate study, Hyland found that 70 percent of the papers he examined (240 articles from eight different disciplines) contained at least one reference to the author's own work. Scientists and engineers, in particular, self-cite frequently, both to establish their disciplinary credibility and to build up a coherent research profile.¹⁶ As Hyland's research confirms, citational practices are closely entwined with disciplinary protocols and identities. At their worst, they offer a potential platform for academic hubris, encouraging rampant name-dropping, self-promotion, and other forms of intellectual self-indulgence. At their best, however, citation conventions promote academic humility and generosity; they remind researchers to guard against plagiarism, to acknowledge their intellectual debts, and to affirm the contributions of their peers.

THINGS TO TRY

- If you have a choice of citation styles, carefully weigh your options. List the pros and cons of each style you are considering (for example, MLA versus Chicago or APA versus Harvard) and make an informed decision based on *your* priorities and preferences.
- If you have no choice of citation styles, take control of the situation by establishing your own key principles for employing the required style. For example:

- If the style allows footnotes or endnotes, do you want your notes to be long and discursive or brief and informative? Can you justify your choice? (The fact that other scholars in your field favor one option or the other is not, on its own, a sufficiently compelling reason.)
- If you are using an in-text citation style such as MLA, do you need footnotes at all? (Just because they are conventional in your field does not necessarily mean they are *required*; many editors in fact discourage discursive notes.)
- Will your list of sources function as a full bibliography, naming every book or article ever published on your research topic, or as a “Works Cited” section, listing only those works that you actually mention in the main text? (Your response will no doubt be influenced by disciplinary conventions, but need not be ruled by them.)
- Whenever possible, compose your book or article from the outset in the citation style you plan to use for final publication. For peer-reviewed articles, use the house style of the journal to which you intend to submit the article first.
- Read all of your discursive notes and/or parenthetical citations aloud. Can you trim them, polish them, move them into the main text, or position them less obtrusively?

CHAPTER 13

THE BIG PICTURE

If you ask a roomful of academics to characterize stylish academic writing, at least a few will inevitably reply that the authors they most admire are those who “express complex ideas clearly.” Some might embellish the point, noting that stylish academic writers express complex ideas clearly and *succinctly*, clearly and *elegantly*, clearly and *engagingly*, or clearly and *persuasively*. Others will propose variations, stating that stylish academic writers express complex ideas in language that *aids* the reader’s understanding or *challenges* the reader’s understanding or *extends* the reader’s understanding. Central to all these definitions, despite their differing nuances, is the elusive art of abstraction; that is, the stylish academic writer’s ability to paint a big picture on a small canvas, sketching the contours of an intricate argument in just a few broad strokes.

Paradoxically, the most effective academic *abstracts*—a noun I use in this chapter to designate any summary statement of academic purpose, such as a grant proposal, article synopsis, or book prospectus—are often highly *concrete*, harnessing the language of the senses as well as the language of the mind. Performance scholar Sally Banes, for example, uses the sensual word “stink” to communicate the physical and symbolic importance of odor in Western theater: