

THE UTILIZATION OF FOOTNOTES IN HISTORICAL WRITING: A DISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE

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Last year a student in my senior research seminar in history, frustrated by the intricacies of citing sources properly, asked what must be one of the most vexing questions of our discipline. Why not use simpler systems such as in-text citations preferred by other disciplines? Why spend so much time worrying about the natural order of a footnote (or endnote) and the alphabetical order of a bibliography? Why do we need to be so concerned over abbreviations, shortened titles, or the use of *ibid.*, the one remaining Latin abbreviation, when they are not even necessary? And why bother with all this debate over primary and secondary sources and, beyond that, whether they are even good primary or secondary sources? Why judge a paper by all the appendages, such as footnotes, sources, and bibliography, especially when most of the information could be incorporated into the text? And what about Kate Turabian's manual? It's too general, too confusing, and, moreover, the professional journals follow their own guidelines that might agree (or disagree) with Turabian on key points. Does all this prove that history, like its subject matter, really is stodgy, out-of-date, that it is an archaic discipline seeking to impress by accessories rather than persuade by narration?

For those of us who practice the craft as well as the art of historical writing, the answers seem almost implicit in what we do and write. Because we "do" history so much in terms of teaching, writing, reading, and critiquing the works of others, we sometimes are not prepared to answer such basic questions about our discipline. Why does history have such a unique style of footnoting? Perhaps the most frequent justification lies in the fact that, although historians might disagree on some minor points of style and method, there is an overall consistency in citation generally accepted by almost everyone in the discipline. In other words, we all do it, so there you have it. Thus, to displace the current system, you must demonstrate that another works better than the one currently in use. This approach almost always prevails in dealing with undergraduates, probably better with history majors than others, and with graduate students it is foolproof.

Let me suggest that the "we all do it" explanation has more to it than just consistency and initiation into the inner circle of practicing historians. Implicitly understood and accepted by the majority of practicing historians, the citation style masks many of the discipline's hidden secrets. The explanation of these secrets is in itself a footnote to the discipline as a whole.

Historians do not use an in-text or reference style of footnoting because these methods are incompatible with several standards, both major and minor, that define history as a discipline. Moreover, even the currently popular practice of placing footnotes at the end of an essay as endnotes, or in the back of a monograph behind all the chapters, tends to reinforce the same disciplinary standard despite the physical displacement. Whether at the bottom on each page or at the end of a chapter or article, footnotes, in their

relationship to what is being written, help to formulate the critical essay that is the primary genre of the discipline.

Perhaps the most critical standard has to do with how things are proven in history. In math, for example, it is true that two and two equals four, but such truths, while thoroughly predictable, do not necessarily correspond to reality. In other words, two and two must always equal four, but two cups of sugar and two cups of water do not equal four of anything. In this case, math is not real—chemistry is—and math only gives us an approximation of reality. Predictability and correspondence in math are important standards, while reality is secondarily important. In history, truth or predictability is less important than reality, narration and sequencing more significant than truth. Given a set of factors within a problem, a mathematician must come to the same answer every time. Given a set of events and circumstances revolving around a problem in history, historians can come up with any number of plausible conclusions. For example, given the same time frame, events, people, and circumstances, would the American Revolution have occurred in exactly predictable ways? If you know what caused one revolution, can you, in general, predict future revolutions? Of course not. Does this mean that history is less a discipline, less rigorous than math or chemistry? Obviously not. What it does suggest is that whatever constitutes proof in one discipline is not the same in another.

History allows a great deal of contradiction within its burden of proof, math very little to none. While most students in a history class readily would agree with the statement that George Washington was a great president, a majority might question the assertion that he hated women. Little or no proof is required in the former statement, but a great deal is asked in the latter. Exactly how would you prove that Washington was a strident chauvinist? Did Thomas Jefferson have a black mistress named Sally Hemmings? If Jefferson has scores of biographers, if hundreds of researchers had read every scrap of paper he touched and examined all his known correspondence and that of his friends and never come to that conclusion, then why would Fawn Brodie say that he had? Which assertion is the more difficult to prove? Which is more acceptable to most historians? Why? Still, each allows for some contradiction, disputation, difference of opinion, even rebuttal.

How do you make your point? Support your argument? What statements need corroboration? Which ones do not? What kind of verification or documentation is required? The answer is simple. Just look at the footnotes. In a crucial way, footnotes and their placement are central to the considerations of proof and evidential claims within history. At the bottom of a page they combine with text to allow methodology and documentation to blend into an historical argument. Place citations and references within the text itself, and, in a crucial fashion, the burden-of-proof standard within history will be changed. More will be required of narration and methodology, less of sources and documentation. More than it already is, history would become more like a social science, less like *Clio* and the humanities from whence it came.

Journal articles in a great many of the social sciences, such as sociology, psychology, economics, even political science and education, prefer to place references within the text. Any reader of a social science periodical such as *The Journal of Social*

Psychology inevitably will glance over the ubiquitous parenthetical reference to an author and page while concentrating on the text instead. That is as it should be. Quite often the sentences around a citation summarize, analyze, and respond to the reference itself. Paraphrasing an authority thus has a different function in the social sciences. It connotes a familiarity with the literature and with relevant authorities in the field. As such, an in-text citation is marginal to the burden of proof. In the social sciences, the quarrel over proof occurs within the methodology utilized and not in the sources consulted. They simply support the methodology. Generally, articles, essays, and projects within the social sciences concentrate most of their effort on setting up the schemata, defining terms, explaining the mode used, and, most importantly, on showing how data was gathered and analyzed. Internal methodology dominates proof within the social sciences to such an extent that sometimes as much as two-thirds of the content of any project or research is spent explaining the process itself. At the end, there is only a works cited appendage for fuller referrals.

For historians, methodology, while still important, is more implicit, even hidden within the framework of the argument itself. Instead of saying "This is what I am going to do" and "This is how I am going to do it," historians prefer embedded contextual explanations. In other words, narration frequently conceals methodology. Do we tell the reader that this is our model? No. Just read on. Do we define key words and phrases? Yes, but not by saying "A revolution in the eighteenth century meant . . ." The definition will be in the context of the paper itself. Do historians make a point by explaining "I will attempt to prove that . . ." Perhaps, but such connective language generally is not preferred. More appropriately, read a paragraph and relate it to the ones before and after to find out what the point is. How do you prove a point? By your methodology, even if it is not obvious? By referring to other similar studies? Of course not. Look at what you are asserting in relation to your sources. In history, the footnotes and the text together carry the burden of proof in any argument. In some articles and chapters, footnotes have as much if not more space than the text itself. That is as it should be. Does this make history more scientific, more like Ranke and the German positivists wanted? Not really. Even with a great many footnotes and less text, an historian might not have proven anything. In history, the quality of sources counts more than the quantity.

Historians who amass lengthy and tortuous footnotes at the end of every few sentences or paragraph perhaps misconceive what needs to be proven and what does not within the discipline. Sometimes they are just showing off. While it is necessary for any writer to be familiar with the content and latest developments within a field, the obligation to convey information in footnotes is less than that of proving points within an argument. Footnotes that reference and inform, while important to the text, are peripheral to the central relationship between argument and proof. It is here that most of the misapplications occur and where those who criticize the discipline have legitimate complaint.

In history, the burden of proof rests primarily upon the quality of sources. Without primary sources, arguments and theories still can be proven, but not as easily or as convincingly. Moreover, those that can be proven without relying heavily upon primary

sources are less basic to the promotion of the discipline as a whole. In this way, writings that are primarily historiographical in nature or that seek to analyze or synthesize previously published information frequently do not play the same pivotal role within the discipline as do monographs and critical articles that depend upon a close interaction with primary sources. Thus, when footnotes are used to convey a low burden of proof, i.e., for information or as references, primarily in texts and historiographic essays, they often are placed at the end.

Footnotes are also essential to the level of proof within history. If the argument of any paper, article, or monograph is solid or plausible, even with some contradictions and disagreements, what then are the implications, the positive and negative consequences, of acceptance? What has been proven? What can or should be proven? What is the level of proof? In general, historians, as reflected in their research and writing, usually prefer lower and not higher levels of proof. What are the consequences of trying to prove that Jefferson had an African-American mistress? What are the positive and negative implications if the claim can be proven? In many cases, the level of proof does not exist to carry such arguments. Thus, many of the most vexing problems within history simply cannot be proven in one fashion or another. What really started the American Revolution? Did Franklin Roosevelt positively know the Japanese were going to attack Pearl Harbor before they actually did on December 7? Of a certainty, we can never really know.

Given this limitation, historians frequently opt for lower levels of proof. In many cases they succeed only in proving the obvious over and over again. Did Hitler really hate Jews? If we know that Susan B. Anthony opposed extending the right to vote to African-American men, would anyone be surprised to learn that she also had a white upper-class bias against African-American and working-class women? No kidding! Really? Faced with a difficult and tedious burden of proof, historians, through their research and writing, tend toward lower levels of proof. Thus narrative summary and analysis and not sophisticated levels of argumentation such as metaphor and alternative hypotheses dominate historical genres. Few disciplines match history in content summary and explanation. Not surprisingly, the form and types of footnotes utilized in historical writing match the discipline's cognitive emphasis on summarizing and analyzing information. Informational footnotes and references such as "see also" and "for another view" are scattered about in historical writing, but, almost inevitably, attention of readers and critics will be focused upon arcane primary sources and on what has not been consulted. The message is simple and straightforward in historical citation. In a discipline that summarizes and analyzes, more is better. The relationship between text and footnotes accordingly becomes crucial to the burden and level of proof. Faced with a higher burden of proof, historians frequently choose a lower level of proof. In this way, history, as a field, eschews what it perceives to be loose generalizations and the lack of particularity in assertions made in other disciplines for masses of documentary support for statements that say very little. In this way, the discipline tends to be conservative in its claims, painstaking in its research, and analytical in its methodology.

In this way, historians commonly use footnotes to prove too little too much. Frequently, lengthy footnotes that give information and cite additional references are only

marginally necessary to what is being proven. Moreover, many primary sources, the most meaningful ones for historical proof, are unavailable or inaccessible to nearly all readers. The argument is not that references or relevant information is not necessary to the points made in the text or that arcane primary sources should not be utilized, but, more importantly, that they become obstacles and unnecessary restraints within the discipline. Must every journal article associated with the subject being researched be cited to exhibit a familiarity with the field? Should an article be published simply because an historian has used more obscure primary sources than others or because, for prudent reasons, he or she has a near monopoly on a particular group of primary sources? Footnotes should be used to complement and to support textual arguments, not replace them.

The persistent use of footnotes in the form of marginal referencing and unnecessary citation to avoid methodological criticism can cramp the style of historical narration, one of the chief hallmarks of the discipline as a whole. First and foremost, historians are engaged in the task of telling stories grounded in the reality of events. Thus, the art of narration, of piecing together information from the past, is the primary job of the historian. If footnotes and citations take up half a page of text, if they and not the text carry the burden of proof, if they unnecessarily restrain the conclusions of the historian, they could interfere with the narrative itself. Narration and not some ultimate truth should be the major concern of historical writing. Ultimately, historians, unlike scientists and mathematicians, can never know exactly what "the truth" was in recreating past events. In spite of attempts at objectivity and at positivistic accumulations of fact, we can only approximate some aspect of the past. Our attempts at truth and at objectivity as a standard should occur within the text itself, not necessarily in cataloging references and sources or in long lists of footnotes.