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In defense of footnotes

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Common reasons for their dislike

In recent years I have heard several comments from colleagues that footnotes are not a good idea. Instead, the material should be included in the text. Some say that it is no longer the modern style. Others say that they should be avoided because they are difficult to use and students do not know how to use them properly. I suspect that some of the reaction against footnotes stems from their over-use. There is also the rumour that the APA Style no longer supports them.

There is an often forgotten fact about the APA style that we are supposedly following: the APA manual is designed for papers, not for theses. That explains why for instance the APA manual has completely different guidelines for headings to those needed for theses. It also explains some of the dislike of footnotes. The simple fact is that footnotes are sometimes expensive in published articles and books, therefore they should be reduced to a minimum. Notes at the ends of chapters, or at the ends of books, are a cheaper alternative. That reason does not apply to theses, and may no longer apply to much material that is published with modern methods.

More serious is the argument that footnotes are distracting and are bad style. I find this argument curious. I actually like footnotes - preferably on the same page as the text they supplement. When I first read a book I like to read the summary, the table of contents, the references and the footnotes. Interesting footnotes guide me to the text they are linked to. Only then will I get interested in some of the chapters. My major frustration is when the footnotes are moved to the end of a chapter or to the end of the book: I then do not have enough fingers to use in the book, to follow both footnotes and the text.

A text needs to be uncluttered and clear. Therefore footnotes are obligatory

Inevitably in a long carefully argued piece of writing there will be important comments and nuggets of information which need to be present, but which are secondary to the line of argument. Footnotes are 'optional extra reading' which fill in the gaps.

They are especially useful when there are two or more audiences for a work. In my own thesis for instance, I was writing for British examiners and researchers who would not know much about the system of education in Tunisia. I was also writing for a Tunisian audience

who would not always know the general knowledge that could be assumed by someone in Britain. Therefore I used footnotes to politely cover these details.

In addition, my work was a combination of linguistics, education, and Baccalaureate science. I assumed a basic knowledge of science up to the age of 16 (American grade 11, British O level or GCSE level, French level three years before the Baccalaureate). [Here I have just written a comment which I put in brackets, which with advantage could have been placed in a footnote]. To cover all these disciplines I used footnotes to supply any potentially missing pieces of information, or to clarify any small point that could be confusing in one discipline, but not necessarily in another.

The point is that each discipline has its conventions and assumed knowledge which do not need explaining. If these points are explained in the text then the writing becomes needlessly wordy from the point of view of one discipline, but if they are not explained then in another discipline this would be considered to be missing information. It is possible to be so concise from one point of view that the thesis could even be viewed as lacking essential information. Yet if you elaborate in your text, you could be accused of padding your thesis with well known information that does not need to be stated. Footnotes are an easy solution to this dilemma.

My advice therefore to candidates is to **use footnotes, appropriately, and in the glossary to insert a small note in defence of your choice of style**. In this way an examiner can only fault the candidate on their mis-use of footnotes, and cannot fault the candidate for using them.

My question to my colleagues is, **how can dislike of footnotes be reconciled with the higher priority of writing a clear text uncluttered by brackets and uncluttered by distracting but important information?**

Reasons for footnotes

1. To avoid using brackets. Remember, brackets must be used sparingly in a thesis.
2. To give extra information about a topic. They are especially useful to cover sidetracks and loose ends, so keeping the main argument clear.
3. To give extra explanation of words, phrases, or concepts.
4. To provide short definitions especially of terms that are not important enough to the argument to warrant (justify, be worthy of) inclusion in the main text.

5. To provide supplementary references, as proof that you have covered the wider topic.
6. To provide further examples.
7. To provide short translations. NB specify who did the translating.
8. To provide supplementary argument and clarification of the point made.
9. To answer anticipated objections to the point being made.

A footnote that develops into an essay deserves incorporating into the main body of the thesis, or relegating to the appendices. In other words, any footnote longer than ten or so lines should be made into an appendix.