Footnoting: What, Why, When and How

GAM 224, Prof. Robin Burke
Spring 2006

What:
A footnote is a note, comment, and/or bibliographic citation that literally appears at the foot of a page and refers to a specific part of the text on the page. A footnote is sometimes also referred to as a reference. A footnote is said to cite a source.

Why:
Footnotes are essential for two major reasons:
1. By means of footnotes, the student acknowledges and identifies all the works of other people used to produce an essay. All sources need to be identified. Such attribution is particularly important in questions of copyright infringement and plagiarism.
2. Second, footnoting is essential because it provides the reader with an opportunity to assess and to verify the accuracy and the authority of any statements, assertions, ideas, or concepts that appear in an essay. In this sense, documentation serves as both proof and evidence. It also provides the reader with a convenient means of finding more information about your topic.

When:
You should footnote any fact or opinion that you read in one of your sources, whether you first discovered the idea there or you have assimilated it so thoroughly that it seems to be your own. Some exceptions to the rule are facts that are common knowledge (for example, that computers use binary logic), facts that can be verified easily and do not differ from one source to another (for example, that Katamari Damacy was released in 2004), and well-known sayings or proverbs. Acknowledgement of credit through documentation does not diminish the originality of your work. Your contribution consists of imposing your own order on your materials and drawing an original conclusion from them. Documentation allows your reader to see the materials you used to reach your conclusions, to check your interpretations of sources, to place your work in the tradition of inquiry, and to locate further information on your topic.
A footnote that identifies the source of material is required in four situations:
- direct quotations, even excerpts
- paraphrased or summarized presentation of original or unique ideas (indirect quotes)
- quantifiable data (facts and statistics)
- visual material, both content and design
In addition, you should footnote:
- a fact that is not well known, even within a discipline.
- a fact that is contradictory to other facts or suppositions.
- a fact that is obscure or difficult for the reader to verify.
- verify specific pieces of information that bear directly upon important points or arguments.
- verify facts brought in from other disciplines.
- any opinions and ideas not your own.

How:

In this class, we will employ the Humanities style of footnoting as spelled out in the Chicago Manual of Style. Some specific examples follow. Additional advice can be found at the University of Wisconsin website: http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/DocChicago.html and from the DePaul University Writing Center.

Every analysis paper will begin with a reference to the game being discussed. A citation is absolutely necessary here and must not be omitted. For example, one might write

"Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas" borrows liberally from stereotypes found in 'gangsta' rap and urban-themed movies."

Let’s say that you want to include a quote from the book:

"The spatial features of a game have a strong impact on creating the narrative space of possibility."3

Whenever you use a source for the first time, you always need to include a full citation. But if later in the essay you use other material from a previously cited work – perhaps you paraphrase the authors' description of game theory as a branch of economics concerned with decisions and outcomes – you can simplify the citation.4 Since there is no way to refer to the internal content of a game (much as we might like to), you only need to cite the game once even if you refer to it again.

If you draw on your lecture notes, you also need to cite the source.5 Likewise, if you take material from an article, you need to cite it, introducing the author or authors in your narrative as the source of the information you are including:

As game scholar Gonzalo Frasca notes "most games force players to simply walk or run to their objective. GTA3’s great achievement was to allow the player to do what most people with lousy jobs do: turn their dull activities into a game."6

Finally, if you think you should include some material drawn from an online review:

A simulation strategy always leaves open the possibility of a glitch that will allow players to gain unrealistic advantage through omissions in the simulation code. For example, the ability to rob the same house over and over again in GTA: San Andreas.7

The manner by which footnotes are produced will differ depending on your word processor. If you are using Microsoft Word, the footnote command is accessed from the "Insert" menu, under the submenu "Reference". The default selections of "Footnotes" (Bottom of Page) and Continuous numeric numbering are what you want.

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4 Salen and Zimmerman, 232.
5 Robin Burke, Lecture, DePaul University, 7 February 2005.