

Critical Reading: Outcomes (c) – (d), part II

(Slide 1) This lecture focuses on three conventions of academic writing: bibliographies, parentheses, and footnotes. Endnotes work exactly like footnotes, except that they are placed at the end of a chapter or book rather than at the bottom of each page, so they won't be treated separately.

(Slide 2) The bibliography, which is near the back of a book, shouldn't be read straight through, nor should it only be read after the text proper has been completed. A bibliography is a list of other texts to which the text you're reading refers. Bibliographies present information to help you find those other texts, and references in your text point to parts of those additional texts. You won't want to follow every reference through to its source, but one of the main critical reading skills (one not explicitly assessed in this course) is the ability to know when you need to take your non-linear reading outside of the current text and read part of a book referred to in the one you're currently focused on.

(Slide 3) Even when you don't follow bibliographic references through to another text, there will often be cases when you'll want to refer to the bibliography. Generally you'll do this when you want to know the source of a claim (what kind of a work it comes from, that is) because knowing the source helps you assess its truth or value. One reader will probably want to look up select references in the bibliography while reading the main text, and others perhaps not at all. What bibliographic references he turns to will be determined more by his own interests in reading the book than in any objective features of the book itself.

Now, there might come a time when you'll run through all the entries in a bibliography, but even then you won't be reading every word in order. If you know the field well, you might just be looking at the names of authors, to get a rough idea how well your author knows the field. Or you might be looking for articles from journals, to see which journals get cited and how often – then you might ignore the listings for books entirely. Or you might just look at books, focusing on their publishers rather than the authors or titles. Or you might do a keyword search, looking for titles (of books or articles) that address a particular topic; you might do this even if you don't read the book, just to find other things to actually read. And there are plenty of other ways of reading a bibliography in addition to these.

(Slide 4) Now let's consider two other features of academic texts: parenthetical remarks in the body of a text and notes. Footnotes and endnotes function exactly the same way, but for ease of presentation we'll focus on footnotes.

Examples will help illustrate how this works. In his paper "Nothing To Do with Democracy: Athenian Drama and the *Polis*" (*JHS* 123 [2003] 108), P.J. Rhodes is considering the quote-unquote "fashionable" view among scholars that Greek drama implicitly questioned the democratic views of the Athenians because the culture of Athens encouraged this kind of questioning. This paper follows a standard model of academic research: pick a thesis that seems to represent the opinion of most scholars, then either try to refute it or at least add nuance to it by an examination of a particular selection of evidence. Here is a representative sentence from the paper, in which he looks at rules for how the people were selected

who sponsored (that is, paid for) the performance of plays – in ancient Athens, plays were a form of entertainment offered free in a public space by the government. OK, so here’s the quote:

As for procedures, nomination of choregoi by tribes (for dithyramps, and by the time of the Ath. Pol. for comedies) need not be distinctively democratic, though I dare say Athens’ particular mechanism was; and again appointment by the archon (for tragedies, and at first for comedies) need not be distinctively democratic, though I dare say the rule that he was to appoint the richest men who could not claim exemption was.

Fairly complicated sentence, but once you know how to read it, its meaning is straightforward. Here parentheses are used to add details, really caveats. Without these details, the sentence would only be approximately true. Notice that the sentence can be read perfectly well without reading what’s in the parentheses. The parentheses add information but are unnecessary, both grammatically and in terms of the passage making sense, but they are important additions to the main claim of the sentence nonetheless. So they are stuck in parentheses as a way of marking them off visually from the main part of the sentence.

(Slide 5) Contrast this with footnote #84 in the same paper, which reads:

So, at any rate, the Athenians claimed: Dem. 20 Lept. 141.

In both cases Rhodes adds additional information, including one reference to an ancient source (in the parenthesis, to the *Athenaion Politeia* of Aristotle; in the footnote, to Demosthenes’ work *Pros Leptinen*). In one case he puts the additional information in parentheses, and in the other in a footnote, but he could have just as easily done the opposite. We may conclude from these examples that footnotes are really just parenthetical remarks, but put at the bottom of the page rather than in the body of the text.

It’s worth noting in passing that this conclusion is itself an inference, and one of the type known as an induction: just because the information in this parenthesis could have been put in a footnote, and vice versa, doesn’t necessarily mean that these are always alternate ways of doing the same thing. However, the inference is in this case warranted, or justified, by the fact that the roles that footnotes and parentheses play are the same: both comment on parts of a sentence by giving more information.

(Slide 6) In general, short comments will be put in parentheses and longer ones in notes, but it’s not at all uncommon to see very short notes. The picture on this slide is from a book that gives even the briefest references their own footnotes. Still, there’s plenty of room for individuality, and to some extent the use of parentheses and notes is an aspect of every author’s individual style.

That said, some academic disciplines tend to follow particular conventions, which can be formalized in what are known as “styles.” Thus, works in the social sciences tend to follow “APA style” whereas many

humanities disciplines follow either the “MLA style” or “Chicago style.” According to some styles of writing, individual references always go in text, whereas in other cases they get their own footnotes. In courses, professors will generally tell their students if they prefer a particular style. Styles can dictate particular uses and formats for references.

The choice to adopt a given style of reference in itself says something about the audience that the author is targeting. The journalist John Anderson holds a PhD in American Studies from Yale, and he certainly knows how to annotate a scholarly work, but in *Art Held Hostage*, a book about the Barnes Foundation, which has one of the largest and possibly the finest collections of modern French art in the world, valued at more than \$6 billion, he says explicitly “readers will note that there are no source notes. As I point out in the Introduction, *Art Held Hostage* is neither a scholarly biography nor a work of art history” (xi). In the passage from the Introduction to which he refers, he adds that he is not an art historian. Presumably readers should draw some kind of inference from this remark, perhaps that only scholarly books should have scholarly apparatus, or perhaps that he doesn’t want to mislead readers by making his book look too much like a work of art history, when in fact it isn’t. But really the decision to omit source notes is just Anderson’s choice. It probably reflects who he or his publisher want to market the book to. It might simply be because he doesn’t want to take the time to produce notes. And it might be that his use of sources has been rather casual, and formal notes would make this too obvious to readers.

(Slide 7) Here’s another example, in this case presenting the entire page from an academic book to illustrate both text and footnotes together. The top part, above the dividing line, generally mirrors the flow of conversation. It can be read linearly, unless it includes parentheses, and additional information is put in the footnotes. Note that on this page the footnotes are of two kinds. One just gives references, sources of information for claims made in the body of the text, but footnote #48 contains an entire paragraph of text, labeled on the slide as “discussion.” This paragraph is parenthetical to the main argument, and while in principle this could have been included above in parentheses, you can see that it is much easier to read when it’s set off in this way.

(Slide 8) In many fields full bibliographic references are given in the bibliography at the end of the book and short abbreviations are given in the body of the text in a way that allows the reader to find the full reference in the bibliography if necessary. A system of reference common in the humanities and many social and natural sciences, illustrated on this slide, uses the author’s last name and the date of publication in the main body of the text. In this example, the phrase *Blanchard et al (1993)* tells the reader who wishes to know the source of the information reported in this sentence to look in the bibliography for a work written by Blanchard and other people – that’s what “et al” means – in 1993. The reference in the main text is underlined on this slide for emphasis, and the arrow illustrates how it points to the entry in the bibliography.

(Slide 9) A similar system used particularly in the natural sciences numbers every entry in the bibliography and then uses these numbers, parenthetically in text, to refer readers to the corresponding

entry in the bibliography. This system is illustrated on this slide. The reader needs to know that the number six in square brackets refers the reader to the sixth entry in the bibliography.

(Slide 10) Imagine you're taking a course and the homework assignment is to read 20 pages for the next class. You're a good student so you do that, looking at all the words in the main part of the text, making the sounds of each word in your head and ignoring footnotes, endnotes, bibliographies, and other aspects of academic texts. You just read the text linearly, left to right and top to bottom, going to the next page when you finish the one you're on. When you see references to other parts of the book you ignore them. A lot of students study this way, and when they do they generally miss out on a lot.

Academic books aren't written to be read in this simple, linear fashion, and conventions like parentheses, footnotes, and bibliographies are designed to make it easier for readers to get the most out of what they're reading. This lecture has devoted a fair amount of time to discussing these conventions because the more comfortable you are with them, then the more likely you are to make proper use of them when you're reading critically.

But you can't just go to a note, or another part of the book, when the text tells you to. While you read you always need to keep in mind why you're reading this particular text, what you came to the text to get out of it, and asking questions of the text based on your reading goals. These conventions make your job a lot easier if you know how to use them, but they're just a start.

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