

Incorporating Footnotes effectively into Essays

What follows is not based on a uniform, agreed notion of what constitutes effective footnoting technique. Rather, it is a personal reflection based on years of experience of reading scholarly articles/ books, reviewing articles for journals, and writing for journals and book publications myself. In all cases, I use as an example a recent publication of my own:

S.J. Green (2018), “Seneca’s Augustus: (Re)calibrating the Imperial Model for a Young Prince”, in P.J. Goodman (ed.), *Afterlives of Augustus: AD 14 – 2014*, Cambridge, 44-57.

Effective footnoting is essentially a combination of **convention** and **judgement**.

1. CONVENTION

- (a) Unless you are told otherwise, always use the numerical mode for footnoting (i.e. 1,2,3 rather than a,b,c or i,ii,iii);
- (b) It is customary to place the footnote numerals *after* any adjacent punctuation: e.g.

Green (2018) 45:

As the sources are keen to emphasise, it is Seneca who is pulling the new emperor’s strings at this point.¹

Green (2018) 46-7:

More relevantly for our purposes, he evidently shares the same political consciousness as the ‘speaker’ of the *Res Gestae*, as he takes the opportunity to mention some of his achievements before indignation towards Claudius’ crimes cuts short his recollection (*Apoc.* 10.2):²

- (c) It is neater to collate references into one overall footnote than to have a series of footnotes in close proximity within the same sentence: e.g.

Green (2018) 46:

In constructing his charming portrait of Augustus the god, Seneca manages to create a seamless continuity between the emperor’s mortal and divine selves: the heavenly *princeps* shares the same capacity for eloquence as his earthly counterpart, as well as his penchant for proverbs and recasting of lines from Homer.³

as opposed to:

In constructing his charming portrait of Augustus the god, Seneca manages to create a seamless continuity between the emperor’s mortal and divine selves: the heavenly *princeps* shares the same capacity for eloquence as his earthly counterpart,⁴ as well as his penchant for proverbs and recasting of lines from Homer.⁵

¹ Tac. *Ann.* 13.3, Dio 61.3.1.

² The text of Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis* is taken from Eden 1984. Translations are my own.

³ His eloquence: with *Apoc.* 10.1 *summa facundia disseruit*, cf. Tac. *Ann.* 13.3, Suet. *Aug.* 84.1, 86. His fondness for proverbs: with *Apoc.* 10.3 *muscam excitare*, 10.3 (proverb in Greek about knee, shin and anklebone), 11.5 *hominem tam similem sibi quam ovo ovum*, cf. Suet. *Aug.* 87.

⁴ For his eloquence: with *Apoc.* 10.1 *summa facundia disseruit*, cf. Tac. *Ann.* 13.3, Suet. *Aug.* 84.1, 86.

⁵ For his fondness for proverbs: with *Apoc.* 10.3 *muscam excitare*, 10.3 (proverb in Greek about knee, shin and anklebone), 11.5 *hominem tam similem sibi quam ovo ovum*, cf. Suet. *Aug.* 87.

or:

In constructing his charming portrait of Augustus the god, Seneca manages to create a seamless continuity between the emperor's mortal and divine selves: the heavenly *princeps* shares the same capacity for eloquence as his earthly counterpart, as well as his penchant for proverbs and recasting of lines from Homer.⁶⁷

2. JUDGEMENT

But even more importantly, effective footnoting is about authorial judgement. Every time you compose a footnote, you are asking your reader to break from the main narrative and go to the bottom of the page and read the relevant footnote; the reader has no choice in this matter, as he/ she cannot anticipate how important it might be to his/ her understanding. The reader, then, must go from main narrative, to footnote, and back to the main narrative again, on as many occasions as there are footnotes. Whether this is an informative or a disruptive experience for your reader depends on the content relevance, style, and length of your footnotes.

So here are some pointers and suggestions:

- (a) Unless you are told otherwise, choose footnotes over endnotes: endnotes are rarely on the same page as the narrative, so the reader's experience is naturally more disruptive;
- (b) Do not feel compelled to use full sentences in footnotes: indeed, keep footnotes as concise as possible;
- (c) Do not feel compelled to use footnotes at all if there is a way of incorporating the information into the main narrative: for example, if you are simply giving a short reference to a primary or secondary source;
- (d) DO NOT use footnotes as a storehouse for materials/ information that cannot find their way into the main narrative: footnotes should qualify/ elucidate the main narrative, not focus away from it.

We are all tempted to use footnotes as a way of (i) cramming in information/research that we want to showcase but cannot find a place for in the main narrative; (ii) getting around a word count. I have been guilty of this myself! But this practice is counter-productive: the longer and more tangential your footnotes are, the more they take the reader away from your arguments in the main narrative, and the more difficult it is for the reader to pick up the thread of your main narrative once he/ she has emerged, tired and confused, from a lengthy footnote.

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⁶ For his eloquence: with *Apoc.* 10.1 *summa facundia disseruit*, cf. *Tac. Ann.* 13.3, *Suet. Aug.* 84.1, 86.

⁷ For his fondness for proverbs: with *Apoc.* 10.3 *muscam excitare*, 10.3 (proverb in Greek about knee, shin and anklebone), 11.5 *hominem tam similem sibi quam ovo ovum*, cf. *Suet. Aug.* 87.