Footnotes and other Diversions

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# Footnotes and Asides

**How can footnotes, endnotes, margin notes and other deviations from the narrative flow, work best in a screen based medium?**

**Author:** Chris Jennings

## Abstract

When Edward Gibbon published his 6 volume *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* towards the end of the 18th Century, he included almost 8,000 footnotes and asides. He wasn’t the first to incorporate supplementary information but Gibbon’s work established the standard for academic publications.

Footnotes are marvellous things. They can provide extra information that helps to elaborate or to cite sources. Publishers don’t like footnotes[[1]](#footnote-23); they prefer endnotes, because they are far easier to manage and encourage buyers to purchase the complete book rather than download a sample.

However, endnotes are a burden for the reader who need to memorise the reference number, page number and even the chapter number before heading off to the back of the book to track down the elusive note.

Footnotes are an endangered species; notes are often relegated to end of the chapter or at the end of the book. The internet gave us to the *hyperlink* and it was thought to solve the referencing paradigm.

The hyperlink introduces another problem; the *back button*.

### Along Comes the eBook

Can authors be creative with the interactive note in the eBook? What can the popup note and the scrolling *excursus* add to an author’s work?

## Introduction

This paper sets out to explore the relationship between the footnote in the printed work and equivalent devices in screen based medium.

What are the conventions in print publishing to display footnotes, side notes and other forms of deviations from the narrative flow? We will look at some examples of the way information is cross linked and where this information is typically displayed in the printed work.

The paper will be divided into 4 parts:

### 1. Footnotes and other deviations in print, past and present

A review of footnotes in history and how publishers have implemented in the printed work. We look at the conventions from the past and what standards are adopted in publishing today.

### 2. Out of the flow in Digital products

In the screen based medium, we can adopt other methods for linking references in the text to footnote content. Of course we can't call them footnotes anymore and they may be *hyperlinks* or *popups*.

### 3. Beyond the narrative flow: interactivity as a way to supplement the content on the page

On the pages of some print books (particularly text books), information is structured in panels in a very busy arrangement. Interactive popups can help bring this chaos to order and provide more space for the *root* information. Glossaries, definitions and asides can all be hidden until needed.

### 4. Supplementing a Shakespeare Play in Digital form

Footnotes, glossaries and added media are used in project work by students on the MA Publishing Media course at Oxford Brookes University. What can we learn from these examples?

1. Chuck Zerby, *The Devil’s Details: A History of Footnotes* (Touchstone 2002) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)