# Citation Rhetoric Examined

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In his influential monograph *The Rhetoric of Citation Systems*, Connors (1999) elaborates on the principle that scholars working with different forms of citation find themselves thinking differently, since the citation format has natural consequences in the way it interacts with the material in the practice of the writer. For example, the popular MLA and APA formats differ radically in the way they handle footnotes. MLA allows writers to include both substantive and citation footnotes, and gives them the choice to include citations at the foot of the page, at the back of the book, or inline. Many journals employing APA, on the other hand, discourage use of substantive footnotes and require that citations be inline. The content of in-text parenthetical citations is also different: MLA requires writers to include a page number for citations, while APA allows writers to refer broadly to a source by author name and year. Connor argues that the APA's emphasis on the year encourages both the writer and the reader to be conscious of how recent the source material is, and that a prejudice tends to emerge against older publications, which helps to strengthen the supercessionist form of thinking across the disciplines where the APA format is popular. In addition, the lack of substantive footnoting in the APA tends to discourage digressions into related but essential content by both writers and readers.

In this project, we examine how citation style may modify the reading experience through a preliminary study with graduate students in the humanities and social sciences. In the first half of the study, we asked five graduate students to read an article that contains a number of substantive footnotes (Booth's "Witchcraft, flight and the early modern English stage"), and had them prepare an alternative version in which they were required to incorporate all footnotes into the text. These two versions correspond roughly to the practice in MLA and APA citation. We note, for instance, that MLA does not require substantive footnoting, and APA does allow for substantive footnotes; however, in practice footnotes are more widely accepted by journals employing MLA style, while APA journals often discourage or disallow footnotes. The goal of the exercise was to look at the differences in handling the two conditions and the effects of those differences on production and reception of academic content. We recorded the details of this process employing Morae usability software and interviewed participants post-task about their process. The study participants found this to be a challenging and at times frustrating exercise. Many remarked that the information in the discursive footnotes was extraneous to the main thesis of the article and that there could be no satisfactory way of integrating that information into the text. Some participants included the footnoted material verbatim parenthetically in-text. Others omitted the footnotes altogether. Generally, participants felt that a paratextual space for discursive content (footnotes) is important, although in the case of this article the footnotes may have contained more extraneous material than would be desirable. Participants found converting in-text parenthetical references more straightforward. A prejudice against the inclusion of the year of publication in text in accordance with APA guidelines emerged: participants noted that the year of publication is less important to understanding the relevance of cited sources than other descriptive information such as title. The respondents did not believe either citation system was better equipped to help readers located referenced sources, but they did indicate that discursive footnotes provide an important venue for valued parallel discussions and related but non-essential information, and

that discouraging the use of discursive footnotes impoverishes academic writing.

Subsequently, we gave the same article to twenty-six undergraduate students: half of the participants read the original, MLA, version of the article; the other half read an APA version of the same article in which footnotes were integrated into the text. Post-reading, participants answered a comprehension question and nine recall questions. Citation style did not appear to affect either comprehension or recall. A significant trend, however, emerged: discursive information, whether it was located in the footnotes in the original MLA version or integrated into the text in the converted APA version, was far less likely to be recalled by participants. More than two thirds of participants did not answer questions based on discursive information correctly, regardless of whether that information was contained in a footnote (as in the original MLA version) or integrated into the text (as in the prepared APA version). This finding appears to temper Connor's thesis about the effects of citation formats on reading.

This project is an initiative of a major collaborative research initiative in the digital humanities, Implementing New Knowledge Environments (INKE), that aims to foster understanding of the significance of digital and analog books and their role in humanities scholarship. It is also part of a larger study of citation rhetoric as exemplified in *Synergies: Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Infrastructure*, a not-for-profit platform for the publication and dissemination of research results in the social sciences and humanities published in Canada. Results of this citation rhetoric research project will benefit analysis of citation statistics in large-scale web search interfaces such as *Synergies*. It will also contribute to further research on automated semantic searches in bibliographies and works cited, such as those covered in the first year of the INKE project (e.g. Ruecker et al. 2009).

## References

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