

## An Introduction to Oliver West's 'Footnotes'



### Introduction

Oliver West is a successful artist, printmaker and visual thinking specialist based in Cornwall, U.K. Over the last ten years he has developed 'Footnotes', a unique portfolio of visual thinking techniques for learning and personal development. His techniques have emerged from his work with schools and universities in the U.K. and Europe in which he gives workshops, staff training days and tutorials to all age groups.



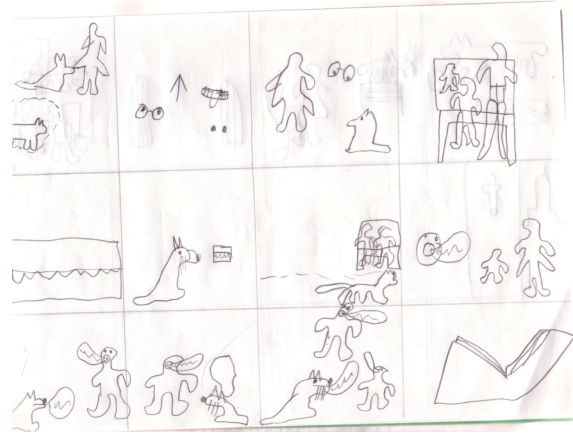
For many years linear-lexical modes of teaching and learning have dominated our classrooms, and learners who think and learn in a non-linear way have been marginalised and misunderstood. But there is an increasing realisation that an understanding of non-linear thinkers is an essential part of the development of inclusive educational practice; indeed the need to discover the specific learning style of *every* individual in a classroom is of the utmost importance. Oliver West's alternative learning methods and study skills introduce learners to visual thinking techniques that can allow them to realise their full learning potential.

Footnotes techniques are also an ideal learning solution for those who find traditional classroom linear-lexical teaching methods challenging. The techniques can enable learners who think predominantly in visual terms to develop their own personalised strategies for learning, and are particularly beneficial for dyslexic learners. With strong dyslexic tendencies of his own, Oliver is uniquely qualified to approach this learning difference. As part of his work, Oliver aims to heighten awareness of dyslexic tendencies and behaviours, enabling learners, parents and teachers to overcome day to day frustrations in communication and learning. Dyslexic learners often see dramatic breakthroughs in performance as they begin to use visual strategies as an aid to understanding and internalising verbal and written cues.

### How does Footnotes work?

The use of drawn images to communicate underpins many Footnotes visual thinking techniques. A picture can holistically symbolise a piece of information without needing any words or linear sequencing at all. The strategies are therefore not dependent on age or language because anyone can make images – the images do not have to mean anything for anyone else, so no drawing skill is required. Unlike spelling or writing sentences, there is no right or wrong picture, so there is no pressure to get it right and it's fun to do! Each person can draw something completely unique to symbolise their thoughts; the drawings can of course be translated into a linear form later, and can be written or described using different words each time if necessary. Most of the issues that visual thinkers and dyslexic learners struggle with stem from having to read or write sentences in which the reader/writer must sequence letters, words and information; without the pressure to produce correct sequencing, visual thinkers are far more free to express themselves and are much more likely to get out what is in their heads!

An important element of Footnotes is the Footnotes Grid, a tool for arranging and sequencing picture-based information. It is simply a piece of A4 paper folded four times and then unfolded. The folds create a grid with sixteen equal blocks, and into these, pictures are drawn. The pictures do not need to be in a linear order – they can be anywhere in the grid. The idea is to create a sort of map of information, without worrying about the order it needs to go in; linking the various pictures to make a sequence comes later. If necessary, the grid blocks can be ordered either by numbering or by cutting them up and laying them out in sequence.



### What can Footnotes be used for?

Footnotes has many applications, in schools, universities and workplaces. The techniques often reveal what a learner's dominant study skill is, and consequently the grid is a template that can be adapted for many different uses; often when it is given to a visual thinker a whole new way of using it emerges. To give an idea of the breadth of ways it could be used, here are four different examples of grid-based techniques that Oliver currently teaches:

*Spelling.* This strategy is designed not only to help children learn to spell, but also to take away the fear of words. It is a useful precursor to other spelling techniques such as synthetic phonics as it creates a space in their brains for processing letter-based information. It encourages children to enjoy spelling, getting them in the right frame of mind to learn new words and giving them confidence. This strategy has an element of discovery in it, and is therefore particularly suited to dyslexic learners who learn far better through facilitated discovery rather than linear instruction.

*Organisation.* Most people find it difficult to hold onto a mental list of all the things they need to do. The organisational grid allows the person to quickly empty their heads of all their thoughts, in any order, by annotating each one in its own box. They can then be categorised in priority order, or sometimes cut up and put into a pile of 'prompt cards'. This grid technique is useful for getting rid of distracting thoughts and allowing the mind to focus on one subject at a time. Because of the issues with sequencing, dyslexics often have issues with personal management. A by-product of using images to process information is better short-term memory and concentration skills which can lead to better personal management; creating an image on paper or in the mind of something that needs to be done has proven to be an effective way of remembering it. This may mean that students have a little notebook that keeps coming out during the day; it will contain a visual map of their minds and what is going on in their lives.

*Essay-planning.* The grid can act as a bridge between image-based information and linear, lexical information. Some dyslexics can write essays very well, but it takes them a long time to plan them. Some students find this frustrating, so Oliver helps them to plan essays in pictures, putting an idea/chapter in each grid square. The process of translation can then begin.

*Behaviour improvement.* The potential application of this technique extends beyond visual thinkers and dyslexics to any person who wishes to change an unwanted pattern of behaviour. It has been developed over the last five years in response to requests from schools to help with students who persistently misbehave. Visual thinkers are often the ones who are seen to be misbehaving; their natural tendencies to be physically active, distracted, noisy and unable to easily complete written/reading tasks mean that they can cause problems in the classroom. But the introduction of Footnotes techniques to these students produced some striking results: those who were successfully using Footnotes often showed dramatic behaviour changes, as their newfound ability to 'work' considerably reduced their disruptive behaviour.

### How does Footnotes fit in with the school curriculum?

Workshops can be adapted to suit the current curriculum requirements of a school or college *without* creating extra workloads for teachers or learners. There are Footnotes techniques for all ages, from pre-school through to university level and beyond. They are designed to work with all students in a class, within the normal process of classroom teaching. Activity days can also be arranged in an out-of-school environment such as a museum or gallery if this is considered appropriate.

Footnotes techniques are particularly useful in planning and preparing for assignments and exams. These are times when a lot of information is collated in the mind; getting that information onto paper in picture form is often a useful tool for learners to process the information externally before translating it into words. Footnotes techniques can help to enhance pupils' ability to record, recall, organise and retrieve information. As well as classroom work, Oliver offers individual tutorials in which he can target a learner's specific needs. These tutorials are extremely popular, and often continue on an ongoing parent-funded basis.

Oliver can adapt his techniques to meet the requirements of any learning environment, and enjoys the challenge of working with diverse individuals with widely varying learning preferences. For more information and bookings, please contact him at the addresses below.



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