Hypertext

What exactly is hypertext [you might ask]? There are a number of possible answers to this question, but let's make things easy for ourselves with a fairly straightforward explanation. We'll deal with the more complex aspects of this subject later in the chapter. Hypertext is a means of organising information in a number of interconnected parts. These parts don't necessarily form a single sequence, and they can be read in various orders. The work as a whole *might* have some unity, but its structure is that of a network. If that sounds rather abstract, let's consider a practical example.

Imagine a typical academic textbook. It will have a contents page, an introduction, and may be composed of half a dozen separate chapters (which could be written by different people). There might be footnotes on each page and notes at the end of each chapter. It might also have pictures, or diagrams with captions. In addition, it is likely to have at least one index, a bibliography, and a list of suggestions for further reading.

When we use such a book, we are unlikely to read it continuously. We consult a chapter, then at a certain point in the text the author might quote from someone else's work. The source of this information will probably be listed at the end of the chapter. So, breaking off our reading, we look at the endnote, where the author gives us the details–and maybe adds some words of comment. We might even find ourselves referred to the work of yet another author. To follow this link we could then turn to the bibliography and perhaps make a note of the work which was being cited.

This is a simplified form of hypertext. We are following *links* placed in the text which lead us from one point to another, either within the text or beyond. We do not necessarily read the book continuously, from cover to cover. You can probably imagine other examples. Older editions of the Bible for instance were produced with a 'critical apparatus' in their margins–the notes and observations of earlier scholars passing comment on alternative interpretations or translations of a passage. Even a government report might have references within it to maps, statistical tables, research findings, earlier reports, scientific evidence, and a bibliography of data. We move from one section of the report to another,