Annotated Bibliographies

Definitions

A bibliography is a list of sources (books, journals, websites, periodicals, etc.) one has used for researching a topic. Bibliographies are sometimes called "references" or "works cited" depending on the style format you are using. A bibliography usually just includes the bibliographic information (i.e., the author, title, publisher, etc.).

An annotation is a summary and/or evaluation. Therefore, an annotated bibliography includes a summary and/or evaluation of each of the sources.

Annotations versus Abstracts

Abstracts are the purely descriptive summaries often found at the beginning of scholarly journal articles or in periodical indexes. Annotations are descriptive and critical; they expose the author's point of view, clarity and appropriateness of expression, and authority.

Functions

An annotated bibliography is a list of citations to books, articles, and documents. Each citation is followed by a brief (usually about 150 words) descriptive and evaluative paragraph, the annotation. The purpose of the annotation is to inform the reader of the relevance, accuracy, and quality of the sources cited.

Process

Depending on your project or the assignment, your annotations may do one or more of the following:

- **Summarize:** Some annotations merely summarize the source. What are the main arguments? What is the point of this book or article? What topics are covered? If someone asked what this article/book is about, what would you say? The length of your annotations will determine how detailed your summary is.

- **Assess:** After summarizing a source, it may be helpful to evaluate it. Is it a useful source? How does it compare with other sources in your bibliography? Is the information reliable? Is this source biased or objective? What is the goal of this source?

- **Reflect:** Once you've summarized and assessed a source, you need to ask how it fits into your research. Was this source helpful to you? How does it help you shape your argument? How can you use this source in your research project? Has it changed how you think about your topic?

Your annotated bibliography may include some of these, all of these, or even others. If you're doing this for a class, you should get specific guidelines from your instructor.
Focus and Preparation

Creating an annotated bibliography calls for the application of a variety of intellectual skills: concise exposition, succinct analysis, and informed library research.

First, locate and record citations to books, periodicals, and documents that may contain useful information and ideas on your topic. Briefly examine and review the actual items. Then choose those works that provide a variety of perspectives on your topic.

Cite the book, article, or document using the appropriate style.

Write a concise annotation that summarizes the central theme and scope of the book or article. Include one or more sentences that (a) evaluate the authority or background of the author, (b) comment on the intended audience, (c) compare or contrast this work with another you have cited, or (d) explain how this work illuminates your bibliography topic.

Why should I write an annotated bibliography?

To learn about your topic: Writing an annotated bibliography is excellent preparation for a research project. Just collecting sources for a bibliography is useful, but when you have to write annotations for each source, you're forced to read each source more carefully. You begin to read more critically instead of just collecting information. At the professional level, annotated bibliographies allow you to see what has been done in the literature and where your own research or scholarship can fit. To help you formulate a thesis: Every good research paper is an argument. The purpose of research is to state and support a thesis. So a very important part of research is developing a thesis that is debatable, interesting, and current. Writing an annotated bibliography can help you gain a good perspective on what is being said about your topic. By reading and responding to a variety of sources on a topic, you'll start to see what the issues are, what people are arguing about, and you'll then be able to develop your own point of view.

To help other researchers: Extensive and scholarly annotated bibliographies are sometimes published. They provide a comprehensive overview of everything important that has been and is being said about that topic. You may not ever get your annotated bibliography published, but as a researcher, you might want to look for one that has been published about your topic.

Format

The format of an annotated bibliography can vary; therefore, if you're doing one for a class, it's important to ask for specific guidelines.

The bibliographic information: Generally, though, the bibliographic information of the source (the title, author, publisher, date, etc.) is written in either MLA or APA format.

The annotations: The annotations for each source are written in paragraph form. The lengths of the annotations can vary significantly from a couple of sentences to a couple of pages. The length will depend on the purpose. If you're just writing summaries of your sources, the annotations may not be very long. However, if you are writing an extensive analysis of each source, you'll need more space.

You can focus your annotations for your own needs. A few sentences of general summary followed by several sentences of how you can fit the work into your larger paper or project can serve you well when you go to draft.
Refer to examples 1, 2, and 3 on the following pages for Annotated Bibliographies that are written in MLA and APA styles.

Sample #1 Annotated Bibliography in MLA Style (7th ed., 2009)

(the cited sources in this sample are bold-faced only for emphasis, but should not be for academic work)

The following annotated bibliography is one possible, general example. Students should be alert and adhere to specific requirements that might vary with each professor’s assignment or to the course subject discipline.


Provides a focused perspective on the role of the Chicana in the workforce and education through the use of historical documents. Includes relevant evidence about the contributions of Chicanas to the Chicana/o movement throughout Southwest history with examples from education, politics, and the economy. Addresses pertinent social justice issues and responses by both the Chicana/o and the anglo populations.


Describes the gender inequality within the Chicano Movement and the impact of Chicana feminism on the overall progress of 1970s social actions. Comprehensive coverage of the Chicana/o history with a careful examination and analysis of key events and players in the quest for ethnic and gender equality.


Discusses the academic resilience of two Stanford Latino students using in-depth interviews. Provides insights into the common struggles faced by many first-time college students who rely on emotional support of families and academic support from faculty and staff at institutions of higher education. Discusses and evaluates various services available to students at crucial points in a college career and the strategies that assist in the efforts for academic success.
“Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) Grant Project.” California State University, Northridge Oviatt Library. February 2, 2005. Web. 7 February 2008 <http://library.csun.edu/hsi/>. Provides a current list of archival materials dealing with Latinos that are available for research purposes at CSU Northridge Oviatt Library. Includes primary source materials that provide first-hand accounts of events and observations of participants who were major players in the Chicana/o Movement.

Stem Cell Research: An Annotated Bibliography


This is the annotation of the above source. In this example, I am following MLA 2009 (3rd ed.) guidelines for the bibliographic information listed above. If I were really writing an annotation for this source, I would offer a brief summary of what this book says about stem cell research.

After a brief summary, it would be appropriate to assess this source and offer some criticisms of it. Does it seem like a reliable and current source? Why? Is the research biased or objective? Are the facts well documented? Who is the author? Is she qualified in this subject? Is this source scholarly, popular, some of both?

The length of your annotation will depend on the assignment or on the purpose of your annotated bibliography. After summarizing and assessing, you can now reflect on this source. How does it fit into your research? Is this a helpful resource? Too scholarly? Not scholarly enough? Too general/specific? Since "stem cell research" is a very broad topic, has this source helped you to narrow your topic?

Not all annotations have to be the same length. For example, this source is a very short scholarly article. It may only take a sentence or two to summarize. Even if you are using a book, you should only focus on the sections that relate to your topic.

Not all annotated bibliographies assess and reflect; some merely summarize. That may not be the most helpful for you, but, if this is an assignment, you should always ask your instructor for specific guidelines.


Notice that in this example, I chose a variety of sources: a book, a scholarly journal, and a web page. Using a variety of sources can help give you a broader picture of what is being said about your topic. You may want to investigate how scholarly sources are treating this topic differently than more popular sources. But again, if your assignment is to only use scholarly sources, then you will probably want to avoid magazines and popular web sites.

Notice that the bibliographic information above is proper MLA format (use whatever style is appropriate in your field) and the annotations are in paragraph form. Note also that the entries are alphabetized by the first word in the bibliographic entry. If you are writing an annotated bibliography with many sources, it may be helpful to divide the sources into categories. For example, if I were putting together an extensive annotated bibliography for stem cell research, I might divide the sources into categories such as ethical concerns, scholarly analyses, and political ramifications.

Fethullah Gulen has founded a movement that attempts to be modernist, nationalist, Islamic, and democratic all at the same time. The article is a brief survey of Gulen, covering his life and influences, the foundations of the movement, the relationship to the military and Islamic community. The secular elites are covered, but not in any great depth. The authors provide a well reasoned and insightful analysis of the significance of the movement, and conclude that Gulen's role will be an important one as a religious leader in modern Turkey, despite the multiple conflicting interests of his followers.


The author provides an in-depth review of Theresa Coletti's book (ISBN-13: 978-0812238006) based on the Bodleian Library manuscript Digby 133 (the Digby *Mary Magdalene*). He is very favorable of the book, and describes the author's analysis as knowledgeable, thorough, and cohesive. Babbitt highly recommends the text for anyone interested in looking at the performance of religion, especially in light of gender issues.

The authors, researchers at the Rand Corporation and Brown University, use data from the National Longitudinal Surveys of Young Women and Young Men to test their hypothesis that nonfamily living by young adults alters their attitudes, values, plans, and expectations, moving them away from their belief in traditional sex roles. They find their hypothesis strongly supported in young females, while the effects were fewer in studies of young males. Increasing the time away from parents before marrying increased individualism, self-sufficiency, and changes in attitudes about families. In contrast, an earlier study by Williams cited below shows no significant gender differences in sex role attitudes as a result of nonfamily living.