



A TAO OF ANNOTATION: OR, HOW TO MAKE FRIENDS WITH YOUR ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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WHAT IS AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY?

An annotated bibliography is a regular bibliography, except that each entry includes a block of text explaining the source that entry describes—this explanation is the “annotation.” Annotated bibliographies are often assigned as precursors to, or elements of, larger independent research projects. It could be that an entire quarter is dedicated to assembling an annotated bibliography for use the next quarter in independent research, or one could be assigned as part of an independent research credit block. With the number of entries expected usually at least 15, with as many as 30 or even 50, beginning your first annotated bibliography can be intimidating. Don’t be fooled: more work now means less work later. This is because the nature of annotated bibliographies is foundational: not only is it due long before your paper’s final draft, it will document the progress of your research project. An annotated bibliography is like a backbone, and each annotation like a vertebra: it cannot and should not be your entire research project, but every argument you make in your paper will be reinforced and held together by what you discovered while assembling your annotated bibliography. Effort poured into this part of a research project can make life a lot easier later on in your project. You should be able to look at your annotations later and see new interconnections, new reasons to return to old sources. To this end, I do not place brevity at the highest importance in this process; much more important is getting down whatever it is you took from the text.

Annotated bibliographies come in two basic forms: a) for the purposes of individual research and b) for publishing, as a sort of “Review of Literature” for future research. The majority of annotated bibliographies are created for personal research, either academic or otherwise, and the expectations of the academic and publishing communities overlap. They both (usually) expect complete sentences, while an annotated bibliography assembled for personal use may not even contain complete sentences—something clearly inappropriate for professional or (most) academic

expectations. If you are not clear on the exact standards your teacher expects in terms of length, the use of “I” statements, and grammar, you should ask.

THAT’S GREAT, BUT HOW DO I ANNOTATE?

A good annotation should include summary, analytic responses, and pure gut reaction. Keep your broader goals in mind at all times while being aware that you are also building the foundation research. Just as often as not, the very sources you are annotating will change the exact direction of your research.

A major element of your annotation is summary. The most important element to a good summary is condensing the author’s argument. Start by highlighting the thesis statement, then keep an eye out for important sentences that support the source’s thesis. Highlight these as well. Once you’ve highlighted all the argument’s main points, try to summarize them in a compact yet comprehensive manner. I usually include the thesis statement verbatim as a quote, then summarize the argument the best I can. A summary should really be just long enough to provide the essence of the author’s argument—since you’ve highlighted the argument’s main points, you will be able to come back and look at the argument in greater detail. Another part of summarizing is providing the context of the source (this is especially important with primary sources). Not only does this help flesh out the source’s relevance to your research, you will often find that the context summary will fit snugly in your final paper without requiring too much revision.

The next step in annotation is to make sure that you include relevant questions and responses that arose during your reading of the source. Perhaps you know for a fact that the author was either misinformed or lying about an important piece of their argument—if the author’s argument hinges on a false connection, you would do well to point out the flaw in your annotation. Perhaps the source contained an angle you haven’t seen before—emphasizing that angle in your annotation can be a great clue for finding sources in the future. Maybe this source’s argument is a great refutation of another source? Pointing this out now may help remind you of this connection when writing your paper. I don’t want to beat you to death with this—it’s your annotation, and you will know what’s best.

Which leads us to “pure gut reactions.” This is the category of statements such as “Well written!” or “Something smells fishy!” or “Awesome!” or, of course, “Bullshit!” These are all fine and can be included at your discretion. The reason, however, that this step is listed last is because these gut-level statements can easily become a crutch if you are not careful. They should be used only after you’ve included a proper summary and your analytic responses.

Since all good research is based on the inclusion of conflicting opinions, it is important to treat all articles seriously. Remember to summarize the argument of a piece even if it is complete trash. Think of yourself as putting in the work to dive in and come back from that soiled text—you don’t want to have to go back in there yourself, do you? What about others? Wouldn’t it be nice to put up a warning barrier around this article, one that articulated its essence well enough to inform others

of its usefulness as you see it? Better to write what's in it when you have your freshest chance than to have to stick your tongue back in it to get a list of its ingredients later.

Part of annotating is evaluating the usefulness of a source for your project. Even a useless source can provide an annotation; just explain why it doesn't fit in, such as what it's missing, and you're done. If you've read it and thought about it, take that reading and thinking and write it down—this is the essence of annotation.

One issue that causes a lot of stress and which therefore must be addressed is the annotation of book-length sources. It is not uncommon to incorporate book-length sources into a research project; in fact, good research is rarely done without them. However, when your annotated bibliography is due as early as week five and you also have the regular load of class reading, the idea of annotating a book-length source can be cripplingly daunting. Until, that is, you find out that you don't need to read the entire text before you begin annotating it. State the argument of the source, evaluate its usefulness, and leave yourself enough information about the source to incorporate it later. Oftentimes, a book will state its argument and avenues of reasoning in an introduction and a conclusion—read these and attempt to answer the following: What is the book trying to accomplish? What is its thesis? What ground does it or does it not cover? Check the table of contents, and then the glossary for anything relating to your project. If there is a chapter particularly oriented towards your research, read it and include what you find in your annotation. If your topic is barely mentioned or is missing, note this. If a new angle on your topic appears, note that.

Hopefully you now feel equipped to start your annotated bibliography. Don't let the assigned number of entries scare you, whatever it may be. Take it one source at a time, and keep your goals in mind. Remember that the more work you put in at the annotated bibliography level, the less work you will find yourself doing later on. Your annotated bibliography should prove an invaluable friend.

CITATION

MPA and APA styles are the generally accepted formats of citation. They are simple to do, but almost no one has them memorized. The Writing Center has tutors, handouts, style guides, and our website, where you can access this information.