Writing an annotated bibliography

Writing and maintaining an annotated bibliography are central to the research process because it enables you to record how you have engaged critically with the current scholarship in your research field.

You may be assessed on your ability to produce an annotated bibliography to review the primary literature on a particular subject, to demonstrate your familiarity with the sources available in your discipline, or to indicate how your sources were significant to your purposes in writing up your research. You also may be encouraged by your lecturer or supervisor to produce an annotated bibliography, even though it will not be assessed.

It is definitely worth developing a systematic approach to note taking that allows for a methodical and organised review of materials from first read. There are an unlimited number of students who peruse/read materials without such a systematic approach who later find that they need to go back and reread material – often when they are short of time and hard pressed to meet deadlines. Consider compiling an annotated bibliography. This is basically a systematic review and record of all significant literature that you have sourced. It is designed to remind you of the relevance, accuracy, and quality of the sources cited. Now while ‘annotating’ every single relevant reference may seem like a highly onerous task, you’ll be grateful for the annotations when you undertake a formal literature review, or when you need to call on the references while writing up.


Annotations: description and critique

A bibliography lists the sources, for example, books, a specific chapter from a book, journal articles, internet material, or conference proceedings, that you used when researching a particular topic. As its name implies, an annotated bibliography lists and describes/critiques the sources that you used when conducting research on a particular topic. A bibliography may be annotated either whole or in part, depending on the requirements of the assignment.

The annotations, usually quite brief, can describe and/or appraise the sources. In terms of describing the source, the annotations usually summarise the subject of the source and outline, among other things, the author's argument, methodology and conclusions. In terms of appraising the source, the annotations can focus on the persuasiveness of the author's argument, the reliability of the evidence presented, the relationship of the source to other critics, or the usefulness of its contribution to the discipline's field of inquiry. In some courses, you may be asked to critically assess the value of the source for an essay that you're researching. Because the annotations are brief, you need to be selective in terms of the information you provide and the critique you make.

Format

Like a bibliography or reference list, an annotated bibliography is organised in alphabetical order, by the author's surname. For each entry, you first must provide full bibliographic details of the source – author's name, title, publishing details, date, etc. To do this, consult a style guide relevant to your discipline, for example, MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers or Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA).

Then follow that with the annotation. The length of each annotation can vary; some may be one or two sentences long while others may be a paragraph in length. While annotations are typically in sentence form, that is grammatically complete, you can also use grammatically incomplete phrases; if writing a phrase, begin with a capital and end with a full stop (e.g., “Deals comprehensively with the origins of World War Two”). Annotations may follow directly on from the bibliographic details or they may form a separate paragraph beneath the bibliographic details. If
unsure of the format, consult your lecturer/tutor.
Always refer to the assignment criteria to determine what format is required and how long the annotation should be.

Sample assessment requirements
Asian Studies
Compile a bibliography (total 1,200 words) of six particularly useful sources that approach the topic from different angles, provide different sorts of information, and/or provide different sorts of interpretation.

In 200 words, give a brief account of the information each provides; why each source is worth including; how the various sources relate to each; and what other sorts of information not provided by your sources that seem to you highly desirable for obtaining a sound understanding of the topic in question. Your list of sources should include:

- at least one book
- at least two academic journal articles
- no more than two websites/internet sources.

Only use academically credible sources. Unless you are doing a historical topic use only sources published since the year 2000.

School of Archaeology and Anthropology
Annotated bibliographies are one of the best kept research secrets. If you plan on engaging in any form of research, whether it be an extended undergraduate research project, an Honours thesis, a MA or even PhD thesis, developing the habit of keeping an annotated bibliography will be critical to your research success. In this exercise, each annotation needs to be one A4 page length (1.5 pt spacing, 12 pt font). Ensure you explain the overall aim or goal of the author(s) in a sentence (2 to 3 lines is sufficient); summarise the argument in a couple of sentences; and then critically comment on/engage with the content of each item (eg, is their argument reasonable, do they have sufficient supporting data, is the piece set out in a logical manner, are they successful in their aims, etc). This latter section is where a pass or a Credit as opposed to a Distinction grade (or higher) will be made. Read over the example annotations supplied to gain a better idea of the difference between a good and not so good annotation. Be sensible about the material you select. It will be a lot more work dealing with a book than a single article or book chapter.

Sociology
Locate two relevant books or book chapters from an edited collection. List your sources using the Harvard (author/date) referencing conventions.

Make sure you use this bibliographic style in your essay. Two books or book chapters published relevant to my topic are: 1. 2. In a few sentences, critically assess the value of these sources for your essay.

Content
Depending on the nature of the assignment, the annotations could contain information on the purpose and scope of the work, the author’s argument and main conclusions, the concepts and methods used by the author, and the potential audience for the work.

The reader of an annotated bibliography expects some critical commentary on the source. Evaluative comments could focus on the relative strengths and weaknesses of the work, its argument, its theory/methodology, its place within or contribution to the field, and its overall significance. For example, you may comment on the evidence, the data, case studies or examples used. When thinking about what to critique, it may be useful to pose questions such as these (Ikeda 2002):
Sample annotation: Asian Studies (see website for interactive commentary)


This article deals with developing a Buddhist theory of social justice. It explores the Buddhist theme of 'selflessness' and discusses how this can be used as a basis for such a theory. Cho discusses the theoretical contradiction in Buddhism between being socially engaged and pursuing a goal of individual salvation. The article is good as a source because it applies Buddhism to modern times and modern issues. It also discusses the challenges modern citizenship brings to Buddhism theoretically. It is relevant to the rest of the sources as a result of this. Despite attempts by Cho to explain the theory behind the aspects of Buddhism, some broader background knowledge is helpful to better explore some of the specific Buddhist ideals he raises. Furthermore, one of the most interesting points that Cho raises, that of social engagement versus individual enlightenment, is not developed as fully as it could have been and would be useful to pursue.

Other resources

The following sites contain good information on how to write annotations, along with excellent examples of descriptive and evaluative annotations.


