


Annotated Bibliographies

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What this handout is about

This handout will explain why annotated bibliographies are useful for researchers, provide an explanation of what constitutes an annotation, describe various types of annotations and styles for writing them, and offer multiple examples of annotated bibliographies in the MLA, APA, and CBE/CSE styles of citation.

Introduction

Welcome to the wonderful world of annotated bibliographies! You're probably already familiar with the need to provide bibliographies, reference pages, and works cited lists to credit your sources when you do a research paper. An annotated bibliography includes descriptions and explanations of your listed sources beyond the basic citation information you usually provide.

Why do an annotated bibliography?

One of the reasons behind citing sources and compiling a general bibliography is so that you can prove you have done some valid research to back up your argument and claims. Readers can refer to a citation in your bibliography and then go look up the material themselves. When inspired by your text or your argument, interested researchers can access your resources. They may wish to double check a claim or interpretation you've made, or they may simply wish to continue researching according to their interests. But think about it: even though a bibliography provides a list of research sources of all types that includes publishing information, how much does that really tell a researcher or reader about the sources themselves?

An annotated bibliography provides specific information about each source you have used. As a researcher, you have become an expert on your topic: you have the ability to explain the content of your sources, assess their usefulness, and share this information with others who may be less familiar with them. Think of your paper as part of a conversation with people interested in the same things you are; the annotated bibliography allows you to tell readers what to check out, what might be worth checking out in some situations, and what might not be worth spending the time on. It's kind of like providing a list of good movies for your classmates to watch and then going over the list with them, telling them why this movie is better than that one or why one student in your class might like a particular movie better than another student would. You want to give your audience enough information to understand basically what the movies are about and to make an informed decision about where to spend their money based

on their interests.

What does an annotated bibliography do?

A good annotated bibliography

- encourages you to think critically about the content of the works you are using, their place within a field of study, and their relation to your own research and ideas.
- proves you have read and understand your sources.
- establishes your work as a valid source and you as a competent researcher.
- situates your study and topic in a continuing professional conversation.
- provides a way for others to decide whether a source will be helpful to their research if they read it.
- could help interested researchers determine whether they are interested in a topic by providing background information and an idea of the kind of work going on in a field.

What elements might an annotation include?

1. Bibliography according to the appropriate citation style (MLA, APA, CBE/CSE, etc.).
2. Explanation of main points and/or purpose of the work—basically, its thesis—which shows among other things that you have read and thoroughly understand the source.
3. Verification or critique of the authority or qualifications of the author.
4. Comments on the worth, effectiveness, and usefulness of the work in terms of both the topic being researched and/or your own research project.
5. The point of view or perspective from which the work was written. For instance, you may note whether the author seemed to have particular biases or was trying to reach a particular audience.
6. Relevant links to other work done in the area, like related sources, possibly including a comparison with some of those already on your list. You may want to establish connections to other aspects of the same argument or opposing views.

The first four elements above are usually a necessary part of the annotated bibliography. Points 5 and 6 may involve a little more analysis of the source, but you may include them in other kinds of annotations besides evaluative ones. Depending on the type of annotation you use, which this handout will address in the next section, there may be additional kinds of information that you will need to include.

For more extensive research papers (probably ten pages or more), you often see resource materials grouped into sub-headed sections based on content, but this probably will not be necessary for the kinds of assignments you'll be working on. For longer papers, ask your professor about her preferences concerning annotated bibliographies.

Did you know that annotations have categories and styles?

Decisions, decisions

As you go through this handout, you'll see that, before you start, you'll need to make several decisions about your annotations: citation format, type of annotation, and writing style for the annotation.

First of all, you'll need to decide which kind of citation format is appropriate to the paper and its sources, for instance, MLA or APA. This may influence the format of the annotations and bibliography. Typically, bibliographies should be double-spaced and use normal margins (you may want to check with your instructor, since he may have a different style he wants you to follow).

MLA (Modern Language Association)

See the UNC Libraries [citation tutorial](#) for basic MLA bibliography formatting and rules.

- MLA documentation is generally used for disciplines in the humanities, such as English, languages, film, and cultural studies or other theoretical studies. These annotations are often summary or analytical annotations.
- Title your annotated bibliography "Annotated Bibliography" or "Annotated List of Works Cited."
- Following MLA format, use a hanging indent for your bibliographic information. This means the first line is not indented and all the other lines are indented four spaces (you may ask your instructor if it's okay to tab over instead of using four spaces).
- Begin your annotation immediately after the bibliographic information of the source ends; don't skip a line down unless you have been told to do so by your instructor.

APA (American Psychological Association)

See the UNC Libraries [citation tutorial](#) for basic APA bibliography formatting and rules.

- Natural and social sciences, such as psychology, nursing, sociology, and social work, use APA documentation. It is also used in economics, business, and criminology. These annotations are often succinct summaries.
- Annotated bibliographies for APA format do not require a special title. Use the usual "References" designation.
- Like MLA, APA uses a hanging indent: the first line is set flush with the left margin, and all other lines are indented four spaces (you may ask your instructor if it's okay to tab over instead of using four spaces).
- After the bibliographic citation, drop down to the next line to begin the annotation, but don't skip an extra line.
- The entire annotation is indented an additional two spaces, so that means each of its lines will be six spaces from the margin (if your instructor has said that it's okay to tab over instead of using the four spaces rule, indent the

annotation two more spaces in from that point).

CBE (Council of Biology Editors)/CSE (Council of Science Editors)

See the UNC Libraries [citation tutorial](#) for basic CBE/CSE bibliography formatting and rules.

- CBE/CSE documentation is used by the plant sciences, zoology, microbiology, and many of the medical sciences.
- Annotated bibliographies for CBE/CSE format do not require a special title. Use the usual "References," "Cited References," or "Literature Cited," and set it flush with the left margin.
- Bibliographies for CSE in general are in a slightly smaller font than the rest of the paper.
- When using the name-year system, as in MLA and APA, the first line of each entry is set flush with the left margin, and all subsequent lines, including the annotation, are indented three or four spaces.
- When using the citation-sequence method, each entry begins two spaces after the number, and every line, including the annotation, will be indented to match the beginning of the entry, or may be slightly further indented, as in the case of journals.
- After the bibliographic citation, drop down to the next line to begin the annotation, but don't skip an extra line. The entire annotation follows the indentation of the bibliographic entry, whether it's N-Y or C-S format.
- Annotations in CBE/CSE are generally a smaller font size than the rest of the bibliographic information.

After choosing a documentation format, you'll choose from a variety of annotation categories presented in the following section. Each type of annotation highlights a particular approach to presenting a source to a reader. For instance, an annotation could provide a summary of the source only, or it could also provide some additional evaluation of that material.

In addition to making choices related to the content of the annotation, you'll also need to choose a style of writing—for instance, telescopic versus paragraph form. Your writing style isn't dictated by the content of your annotation. Writing style simply refers to the way you've chosen to convey written information. A discussion of writing style follows the section on annotation types.

Types of annotations

As you now know, one annotation does not fit all purposes! There are different kinds of annotations, depending on what might be most important for your reader to learn about a source. Your assignments will usually make it clear which citation format you need to use, but they may not always specify which type of annotation to employ. In that case, you'll either need to pick your instructor's brain a little to see what she wants or use clue words from the assignment itself to make a decision. For instance, the assignment may tell you that your

annotative bibliography should give evidence proving an analytical understanding of the sources you've used. The word analytical clues you in to the idea that you must evaluate the sources you're working with and provide some kind of critique.

Summary annotations

There are two kinds of summarizing annotations, informative and indicative.

Summarizing annotations in general have a couple of defining features:

- They sum up the content of the source, as a book report might.
- They give an overview of the arguments and proofs/evidence addressed in the work and note the resulting conclusion.
- They do not judge the work they are discussing. Leave that to the critical/evaluative annotations.
- When appropriate, they describe the author's methodology or approach to material. For instance, you might mention if the source is an ethnography or if the author employs a particular kind of theory.

Informative annotation

Informative annotations sometimes read like straight summaries of the source material, but they often spend a little more time summarizing relevant information about the author or the work itself.

Indicative annotation

Indicative annotation is the second type of summary annotation, but it does not attempt to include actual information from the argument itself. Instead, it gives general information about what kinds of questions or issues are addressed by the work. This sometimes includes the use of chapter titles.

Critical/evaluative

Evaluative annotations don't just summarize. In addition to tackling the points addressed in summary annotations, evaluative annotations:

- evaluate the source or author critically (biases, lack of evidence, objective, etc.).
- show how the work may or may not be useful for a particular field of study or audience.
- explain how researching this material assisted your own project.

Combination

An annotated bibliography may combine elements of all the types. In fact, most of them fall into this category: a little summarizing and describing, a little evaluation.

Writing style

Ok, next! So what does it mean to use different writing styles as opposed to different kinds of content? Content is what belongs in the annotation, and style is the way you write it up. First, choose which content type you need to compose, and then choose the style you're going to use to write it

Telescopic

This kind of annotated bibliography is a study in succinctness. It uses a minimalist treatment of both information and sentence structure, without sacrificing clarity. Warning: this kind of writing can be harder than you might think.

Paragraph

Don't skimp on this kind of annotated bibliography. If your instructor has asked for paragraph form, it likely means that you'll need to include several elements in the annotation, or that she expects a more in-depth description or evaluation, for instance. Make sure to provide a full paragraph of discussion for each work.

Conclusion

As you can see now, bibliographies and annotations are really a series of organized steps. They require meticulous attention, but in the end, you've got an entire testimony to all the research and work you've done. At the end of this handout you'll find examples of informative, indicative, evaluative, combination, telescopic, and paragraph annotated bibliography entries in MLA, APA, and CBE formats. Use these examples as your guide to creating an annotated bibliography that makes you look like the expert you are!

MLA Example

APA Example

CBE Example

Works consulted

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout's topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the [UNC Libraries citation tutorial](#).

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