

Writing an Annotated Bibliography

An annotated bibliography is a list of proposed sources for a project; it also contains a brief description and analysis of each source.

Purpose:

Annotated bibliographies are written to help students to organize resources for a major project. When trying to juggle a large number of sources, students often become confused, forgetting the central point of each source and how it relates to the student's project. The annotated bibliography reminds students what they were thinking when they first read the source, allowing them to incorporate these ideas into their final project with ease. Always keep this purpose in mind when writing an annotated bibliography.

Citation:

The purpose of a citation is to allow your readers to locate your sources. Although many different styles exist for citing sources, John Jay College primarily uses APA or MLA style. The Writing Center offers guides on both of these styles and excellent online resources can be found at the Online Writing Lab at Purdue University (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>).

Regardless of the style you are using, some basic formatting guidelines should be followed so that your paper has a clean professional look:

- 12pt Times New Roman font
- 1 inch margins on all sides
- .5 inch hanging indent
- All sources alphabetized by author's last name
- Double spacing throughout

Annotation

Unlike a normal references page, an annotated bibliography also has a note following each entry containing important information about the source and its relevance to your particular paper. This annotation can be broken down into two general components: descriptive and analytic. The descriptive element summarizes the text of the writing. It usually consists of the main purpose of the work (to prove, to provide, to explain, to argue, and so forth) and a summary of the main idea of the text or of the main idea(s) of any relevant sections. The descriptive section of the annotation should discuss the focus of the text and explain any relevant ideas or theories that apply to your work. The analytical section of the annotation provides various relevant pieces of information. This section should include whichever of the following pieces of information are relevant to the cited work:

- **The relevance this text has to your assignment**
- **The relationship of this text to other cited works**
- The intended audience of the work
- Any biases or flaws you found in the text
- The author's background and experience
- The author's conclusions
- Any other noteworthy elements of the text

It is important in an annotation to be brief and to the point. Although your notes should be written in complete sentences, you want to express your ideas as quickly and clearly as possible. Do not include unnecessary details or explanations. You want to stick to the main points, analyses, and key pieces of evidence.

Examples:

Armstrong, T. (1994). *Multiple intelligences in the classroom*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Armstrong describes each of seven intelligences identified by Howard Gardner. He offers an informal checklist for identifying personal strengths in the intelligences and suggests classroom application. This book is a valuable tool for teachers at any level, with concrete suggestions for classroom applications.

This simple annotation presents the basic points made in the text and offers a general explanation of the usefulness of the text. Also, you should take note of the active language that this student uses to clearly convey what the author does with the text. The author describes, offers, and suggests. These verbs and others like them place the author in the subject position of the sentences in this annotation leading to active language.

Howard, T., & Rifkin, J. (1977). *Who should play God?* New York, NY: Dell.

This book “lifts the cloak of secrecy from genetic experiments” and explores, among other things, “who is performing the research and who profits from it” (12). It’s clearly anti-genetic engineering; its chapter titles give a good idea of the direction and flavor of the book, for example, “Eugenics,” “eliminating ‘Bad’ Genes,” “Bio-Futures,” “Scientists and Corporation.” This book looks as if it is an appropriate source for the social arguments from the political left wing.

This, more complex, note summarizes the main point of the article with a quotation then goes on to express the authors’ biases and the intended audience of the article. Also, the final sentence places the source in the context of the annotator’s assignment by giving the specific part of the assignment that this source is relevant to: the discussion of social arguments from the political left wing. Finally, the use of citation allows this student quickly to find quotations within the original source.

Goldschneider, F. K., Waite, L. J., & Witsberger, C. (1986). Nonfamily living and the erosion of traditional family orientations among young adults. *American Sociological Review*, 51, 541-554.

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 shown no significant gender differences in sex role attitudes as a result of living.

This annotation looks at a journal article that reports the findings of a research study. The annotation begins by stating the authors’ backgrounds and presenting the important elements of the study: the method, hypothesis, variables, results, and conclusions. The notation ends by showing a relationship between this article and another study referenced in the annotated bibliography.

Ehrenreich, B. (2001). *Nickel and dimed: On (not) getting by in America*. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company.

In this book of nonfiction based on the journalist's experiential research, Ehrenreich attempts to ascertain whether it is currently possible for an individual to live on a minimum-wage in America. Taking jobs as a waitress, a maid in a cleaning service, and a Wal-Mart sales employee, the author summarizes and reflects on her work, her relationships with fellow workers, and her financial struggles in each situation.

An experienced journalist, Ehrenreich is aware of the limitations of her experiment and the ethical implications of her experiential research tactics and reflects on these issues in the text. The author is forthcoming about her methods and supplements her experiences with scholarly research on her places of employment, the economy, and the rising cost of living in America. Ehrenreich's project is timely, descriptive, and well-researched.

This example shows how a notation can be expanded into a larger entry including a wider range of information. One of the greatest strengths of a notation is its ability to mould to each student's individual needs.

Lamott, A. (1995). *Bird by bird: Some instructions on writing and life*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.

Lamott's book offers honest advice on the nature of a writing life, complete with its insecurities and failures. Taking a humorous approach to the realities of being a writer, the chapters in Lamott's book are wry and anecdotal and offer advice on everything from plot development to jealousy, from perfectionism to struggling with one's own internal critic. In the process, Lamott includes writing exercises designed to be both productive and fun.

Lamott offers sane advice for those struggling with the anxieties of writing, but her main project seems to be offering the reader a reality check regarding writing, publishing, and struggling with one's own imperfect humanity in the process. Rather than a practical handbook to producing and/or publishing, this text is indispensable because of its honest perspective, its down-to-earth humor, and its encouraging approach.

Chapters in this text could easily be included in the curriculum for a writing class. Several of the chapters in Part 1 address the writing process and would serve to generate discussion on students' own drafting and revising processes. Some of the writing exercises would also be appropriate for generating classroom writing exercises. Students should find Lamott's style both engaging and enjoyable.

These examples show how the annotator discriminates what information is important and what information is not. A well-written annotation does not need to present all points of analysis, only those that are relevant to the study at hand. In some cases, the author's background is relevant; in other cases, it is not. Determining what information is important is a key step in creating an annotation because this process allows you to consider what is most relevant for the purpose of your work, increasing the overall effectiveness of source use.

Online Resources and Examples

The Olin & Uris Libraries of Cornell University,

<http://www.library.cornell.edu/olinuris/ref/research/skill28.htm>

LEO: Literary Education Online,

<http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/acadwrite/annotated.html>

University of Wisconsin-Madison's Writing Center

<http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/AnnotatedBibliography.html>

University of Minnesota Crookston

<http://www.crk.umn.edu/library/links/annotate.htm>

Purdue University's Online Writing Lab

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_annotatedbib.html

Prepared by Robert Greco