

A Guide to Annotated Bibliographies

Purpose of Annotated Bibliography

Annotated bibliographies are incredibly useful documents for researchers who want to understand what has been said on a particular topic they are interested in. Indeed, scholars will often conduct such a literature review to see what contextual resources or other literary criticism exists on their texts/subjects *before* they pick out their topic and begin writing. The scholar will first go out and conduct independent research to collect resources; then, prepare proper MLA citations for each source so they can easily find the resource again later; and finally write a brief paragraph note (an annotation) about the resource that will help them remember the resource's main features and how the scholar would like to use the resource in the future.

That is, the annotated bibliography is essentially a list of cited sources with accompanying annotations about that source. The list of cited sources is usually ordered alphabetically by author's last name. Sometimes scholars will subdivide their annotated bibliography into more discrete sections (such as primary sources and secondary sources, or by topic). You can find examples and more information about annotated bibliographies at the Purdue OWL website here: https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/common_writing_assignments/annotated_bibliographies/annotated_bibliography_samples.html

Note that scholars will sometimes publish their annotated bibliographies in book form as helpful guides for other researchers working on the same topic, author, or text—so you may want to see if published annotated bibliographies already exist on your topic so you can get a sense of how they are written OR what resources are important for your research.

Steps to Preparing an Annotated Bibliography

I. Determine resources you want to use for your project or paper

You should try to locate primary and secondary sources on your topic as directed. Use library databases to find published letters, diaries, or essays; monographs (academic books); peer-reviewed academic articles; and other credible resources. Sometimes scholars will research newspapers, non-fiction publications, essays, biographies, government data, or institutional data. For our assignments, I assume that monographs and academic articles will be the best resources, especially if they are produced by a peer-reviewed journal or university publishing house. If you would like to push yourself, using a very broad range of primary and secondary resources may be a good way to expand upon your research skills.

Note: Spend at least 30 minutes to an hour trying to find resources on your own first, then try to block out time in your schedule to consult with a librarian or your professor about your resources—you may want to ask: are these resources sufficiently credible and reliable? Are there better resources or better approaches to searching that I could be using? As a junior scholar, feedback from more senior researchers or even your peers can be invaluable.

II. Cite the source you want to use

Weed out resources you do not want to use. Use MLA format to cite the resources that you do want to use for your larger project.

III. Create an annotation—i.e. a paragraph of notes—on each resource that is helpful to you

Annotations should be detailed reminders about what to focus on when rereading the source, e.g. “Great arguments about the subject of microscopy in fairyland science books appear on pages 20 and 22 of this article regarding [article’s arguments], many of which are points I actually want to [expand by thinking about ____ / argue against when thinking about ____].” Take time to write at minimum 1 paragraph of at least 5 sentences for each resource you want to use. Your annotation should summarize the sources’ (1) key ideas, (2) level of usefulness for the project at hand, and (3) points of interest for the scholar composing the annotated bibliography. When you are explaining why and how useful a resource is, be specific about its utility to you. Where are you going to use this resource? How do the arguments from this resource relate to your own arguments? You should note down any specific quotations, passages, or sections of the reading that may be of particular use to you in your paper and make sure to offer an in-text parenthetical citation to that section for best results.

IV. Order your citations with annotations by the author’s last name, use subsections as necessary

When you format your annotated bibliography, the full MLA citation of Source 1 should go first, then the annotation for Source 1. Leave a line or two of space, then put down the full MLA citation of Source 2, followed by the annotation for Source 2. Leave a line or two of space, the go on with Source 3, and Source 4, etc.

Make sure to...

I. Focus on the most relevant resources to read and take notes on

You want to pick the most relevant resources for your project. If you find a collection of your authors’ letters, for example, it might make more sense for you to focus on a volume of letters from a period just before or during the time when your writer was beginning to write the text you are using for your project.

II. Remember that these notes are meant to help you

These annotations are meant to (1) help you remember the important ideas and terms from each resource you look at and (2) outline how you want to use the resource. The worst thing you could do is waste your own time by not writing sufficiently detailed notes and summaries that you could use in a rough draft of your project or paper later on. Write the annotation knowing that you may need to remember to look up X quote or Y fact on a specific page (and name the page using in-text parenthetical citation!) in the resource. Make sure you leave yourself reminders about what kind of argument or statement you are going to make with this resource. If a resource is only helpful to you in relation to another source, remember to leave yourself a note to that effect.

III. Take precise notes

Do not waste a lot of time with general summaries—if the author of an article or a book argues that they are going to make 5 points, but only 2 points are relevant to you, note in your annotations that you will focus on 2 of the author’s 5 points and summarize only those 2 points that are of use to you.