1 What is an annotated bibliography?

An annotated bibliography is a list of citations to books, articles, and documents. Each citation is followed by a brief (usually about 150 words) descriptive and evaluative paragraph, the annotation. The purpose of the annotation is to inform the reader of the relevance, accuracy, and quality of the sources cited.

2 Annotations vs. abstracts

Abstracts are the purely descriptive summaries often found at the beginning of scholarly journal articles or in periodical indexes. Annotations are descriptive and critical; they expose the author’s point of view, clarity and appropriateness of expression, and authority.

3 The process

Creating an annotated bibliography calls for the application of a variety of intellectual skills: concise exposition, succinct analysis, and informed library research.

First, locate and record citations to books, periodicals, and documents that may contain useful information and ideas on your topic. Briefly examine and review the actual items. Then choose those works that provide a variety of perspectives on your topic.

Cite the book, article, or document using the appropriate style.

Write a concise annotation that summarizes the central theme and scope of the book or article. Include one or more sentences that (a) evaluate the authority or background of the author, (b) comment on the intended audience, (c) compare or contrast this work with another you have cited, or (d) explain how this work illuminates your bibliography topic.

4 Critically appraising the work

You can begin evaluating a physical information source (a book or an article for instance) even before you have the physical item in hand. Appraise a source by first examining the bibliographic citation. The bibliographic citation is the written description of a book, journal article, essay, or some other published material that appears in a catalog or index. Bibliographic citations characteristically have three main components: author, title, and publication information. These components can help you determine the usefulness of this source for your paper. (In the same way, you can appraise a Web site by examining the home page carefully.)

4.1 Initial appraisal of source

Before you start typing consider the following:

4.1.1 Author

1. What are the author’s credentials—institutional affiliation (where he or she works), educational background, past writings, or experience? Is the book or article written on a topic in
the author’s area of expertise? You can use the various Who’s Who publications for the U.S. and other countries and for specific subjects and the biographical information located in the publication itself to help determine the author’s affiliation and credentials.

2. Is the author associated with a reputable institution or organization? What are the basic values or goals of the organization or institution?

4.1.2 Date of publication

1. When was the source published? This date is often located on the face of the title page below the name of the publisher. If it is not there, look for the copyright date on the reverse of the title page. On Web pages, the date of the last revision is usually at the bottom of the home page, sometimes every page.

2. Is the source current or out-of-date for your topic? Topic areas of continuing and rapid development, such as the sciences, demand more current information. On the other hand, topics in the humanities often require material that was written many years ago. At the other extreme, some news sources on the Web now note the hour and minute that articles are posted on their site.

4.1.3 Edition or revision

1. Is this a first edition of this publication or not? Further editions indicate a source has been revised and updated to reflect changes in knowledge, include omissions, and harmonize with its intended reader’s needs. Also, many printings or editions may indicate that the work has become a standard source in the area and is reliable. If you are using a Web source, do the pages indicate revision dates?

4.1.4 Publisher

1. Note the publisher. If the source is published by a university press, it is likely to be scholarly. Although the fact that the publisher is reputable does not necessarily guarantee quality, it does show that the publisher may have high regard for the source being published.

4.1.5 Title of journal

1. Is this a scholarly or a popular journal? This distinction is important because it indicates different levels of complexity in conveying ideas.

5 Crafting the annotation: both descriptive and evaluative

5.1 Descriptive

Having made an initial appraisal, you should now examine the body of the source. You should answer the following questions: Who is the author? What did he/she set out to do? What did they do? How did they do it? What did they find? What are the implications of this work?
5.2 Evaluative

Critically consider the following:

A. Intended Audience: What type of audience is the author addressing? Is the publication aimed at a specialized or a general audience? Is this source too elementary, too technical, too advanced, or just right for your needs?

B. Objective Reasoning:

1. Is the information covered fact, opinion, or propaganda? It is not always easy to separate fact from opinion. Facts can usually be verified; opinions, though they may be based on factual information, evolve from the interpretation of facts. Skilled writers can make you think their interpretations are facts.

2. Does the information appear to be valid and well-researched, or is it questionable and unsupported by evidence? Assumptions should be reasonable. Note errors or omissions.

3. Are the ideas and arguments advanced more or less in line with other works you have read on the same topic? The more radically an author departs from the views of others in the same field, the more carefully and critically you should scrutinize his or her ideas.

4. Is the author’s point of view objective and impartial? Is the language free of emotion-arousing words and bias?

C. Coverage:

1. Does the work update other sources, substantiate other materials you have read, or add new information? Does it extensively or marginally cover your topic? You should explore enough sources to obtain a variety of viewpoints.

2. Is the material primary or secondary in nature? Primary sources are the raw material of the research process. Secondary sources are based on primary sources. For example, if you were researching Konrad Adenauer’s role in rebuilding West Germany after World War II, Adenauer’s own writings would be one of many primary sources available on this topic. Others might include relevant government documents and contemporary German newspaper articles. Scholars use this primary material to help generate historical interpretations—a secondary source. Books, encyclopedia articles, and scholarly journal articles about Adenauer’s role are considered secondary sources. In the sciences, journal articles and conference proceedings written by experimenters reporting the results of their research are primary documents. Choose both primary and secondary sources when you have the opportunity.

D. Writing Style Is the publication organized logically? Are the main points clearly presented? Do you find the text easy to read, or is it stilted or choppy? Is the author’s argument repetitive?
6 Sample annotated bibliography of a journal article

The following example (*only 110 words) and uses the APA format for the journal citation, but any standard format is fine (MLS, etc.).


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 non-family 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 shows no significant gender differences in sex role attitudes as a result of nonfamily living.

7 Summary

The Annotated Bibliography is designed to get you reading, thinking, and pulling from the literature. I encourage you to read both within and outside of the peer reviewed literature as you continue to formulate your review. Although websites and blogs are insufficient references for our Review, they can be great “think tank” resources for you to shape your ideas. Remember, conflict (disagreement) within your group of annotated citations is good. Not all resources need to be in agreement to make a well-positioned paper, in fact controversy in the literature, is often an indicator of potential pioneering thought and analysis. Remember, too, that these particular citations may shift your outlook develop your paper topic.