

Annotated Bibliographies

What is an annotated bibliography?

An annotated bibliography gives an account of the research that has been done on a given topic. Like any bibliography, an annotated bibliography is an alphabetical list of research sources. In addition to bibliographic data, an annotated bibliography provides a concise summary of each source and some assessment of its value or relevance. Depending on your assignment, an annotated bibliography may be one stage in a larger research project, or it may be an independent project standing on its own.

Why should I write one?

An annotated bibliography gives you the chance to comment on a range of sources, placing them into the context of your wider aims and interests. On their own, they're a great reference for others who might be interested in researching an area further. As the start of a larger project, they give you the opportunity to think through the usefulness of and relationships between your sources, getting your voice in with what they're saying so you can start synthesizing them in a way that is useful to your project.

Selecting the sources:

The quality and usefulness of your bibliography will depend on your selection of sources. Define the scope of your research carefully so that you can make good judgments about what to include and exclude. Your research should attempt to be reasonably comprehensive within well-defined boundaries. Consider these questions to help you find appropriate limits for your research:

- What **problem** am I investigating? What **question(s)** am I trying to pursue? If your bibliography is part of a research project, this project will probably be governed by a research question. If your bibliography is an independent project on a general topic (e.g. aboriginal women and Canadian law), try formulating your topic as a question or a series of questions in order to define your search more precisely (e.g. How has Canadian law affecting aboriginal women changed as a result of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms? How have these changes affected aboriginal women? How have aboriginal women influenced and responded to these legal developments?).
- What **kind of material** am I looking for? What sort of **variety** might be useful in my source selection? (academic books and journal articles? government reports or policy statements? articles from the popular press? primary historical sources? etc.)
- Am I finding **essential studies** on my topic? (Read footnotes in useful articles carefully to see what sources they use and why. Keep an eye out for studies that are referred to by several of your sources.)

Summarizing the argument of a source:

An annotation briefly restates the main argument of a source. An annotation of an academic source, for example, typically identifies its thesis (or research question, or hypothesis), its major methods of investigation, and its main conclusions. Keep in mind that identifying the argument of a source is a different task than describing or listing its contents. Rather than just listing

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contents,
an
annotation
should, at
the least,

account for **why** the contents are there.

The following critical reading strategies can help you identify the argument of your source:

- Identify the author's thesis (central claim or purpose) or research question. Both the introduction **and** the conclusion can help you with this task.
- Look for repetition of key terms or ideas. Follow them through the text and see what the author does with them. Note especially the key terms that occur in the thesis or research question that governs the text.
- Notice how the text is laid out and organized. What are the main divisions or sections? What is emphasized? Why? Accounting for why will help you to move beyond listing contents and toward giving an account of the argument.
- Notice whether and how a theory is used to interpret evidence or data. Identify the method used to investigate the problem/s addressed in the text.
- Pay attention to the opening sentence(s) of each paragraph, where authors often concisely state their main point in the paragraph.
- Look for paragraphs that summarize the argument. A section may sometimes begin or conclude with such a paragraph.

Assessing the relevance and value of sources:

Your annotation should now go on to briefly assess the value of the source to an investigation of your research question or problem. If your bibliography is part of a research project, briefly identify how you intend to use the source and why. If your bibliography is an independent project, try to assess the source's contribution to the research on your topic.

- Are you interested in the way the source frames its research question or in the way it goes about answering it (its method)? Does it make new connections or open up new ways of seeing a problem? (e.g. bringing the Sparrow decision concerning aboriginal fishing rights to bear on the scope of women's rights)
- Are you interested in the way the source uses a theoretical framework or a key concept? (e.g. analysis of existing, extinguished, and other kinds of rights)
- Does the source gather and analyze a particular body of evidence that you want to use? (e.g. the historical development of a body of legislation)
- How do the source's conclusions bear on your own investigation?

In order to determine how you will use the source or define its contribution, you will need to assess the quality of the argument: Why is it of value? What are its limitations? How well defined is its research problem? How effective is its method of investigation? How good is the evidence? Would you draw the same conclusions from the evidence?

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Keep the
context of
your project
in mind.
How is

material assessed in your course or discipline? What models for assessing arguments are available in course materials?

Various kinds of annotated bibliographies:

Annotated bibliographies do come in many variations. Pay close attention to the requirements of your assignment. Here are some possible variations:

- Some assignments may require you to summarize only and not to evaluate.
- Some assignments may want you to notice and comment on patterns of similarity and dissimilarity between sources; other assignments may want you to treat each source independently.
- Some assignments might require many sources. If the bibliography is long, consider organizing it in sections. Your categories of organization should help clarify your research question.
- Some assignments may require or allow you to preface the bibliography (or its sections) with a paragraph explaining the scope of your investigation and providing a rationale for your selection of sources.

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