



The Annotated Bibliography

Evaluating a List of Research Sources

One of the early steps in writing a research paper is compiling a collection of sources – that is, doing your research. Most students understand the importance of citing sources, but one step in the process is considering how best to use each one of those sources in the paper. Creating an annotated bibliography is a time-tested method for doing this. Your instructor might even require you to create one. Even if the classwork doesn't require an annotated bibliography, it's a good idea to spend at least some time considering how you want to use your sources.

An annotated bibliography is exactly what its name suggests: a list of sources (that is, a **bibliography**) that includes personal notes (or **annotations**) detailing information about that source and its potential uses. At the heart, creating an annotated bibliography is a comprehensive evaluation of your research materials, and as a general rule, it's produced by a three-step process of summary, analysis, and consideration.

Creating an Annotation

Each source you find in your research will go through a process of review, and your annotations reflect that process. To make an annotated bibliography, begin by setting up a works cited page or reference page as you normally would for a finished paper. For each source you list, write a paragraph or two (the exact length can vary depending on a number of different factors) in *third-person* point of view describing the source and its implications, along with its potential usefulness for your purposes. Generally, that consists of three parts:

- Summary (a brief overview of the source's key ideas)
- Analysis (some of the source's implications and what it all means for the topic you're studying)
- Consideration (how the source will be useful in your paper)

If your instructor has assigned an annotated bibliography, they may have different requirements for what should be included in each annotation, so make sure you understand the instructions of the assignment.

Writing a Summary

A summary is just a general overview of a source. Introduce the source first (is it a periodical, book, journal article, or something else?), then discuss its central idea and key points. The idea is that if a reader looks at a summary, they're getting what they would get just from reading the original.

Consider the central idea of your source, what points are made to support that idea, and what key facts are presented to make those points. In your annotations, don't spend too much time discussing individual details or statistics found in the source unless those things are directly pertinent to a point you plan to make in your paper.

Analyzing a Source

Most annotated bibliographies consist of more than just a collection of summaries. You should spend some time considering the implications of your sources. Don't just discuss what the source says, but also spend some time talking about what that means for your main topic, how it compares with what some of your other sources say, and how reliable the information seems to be.

Remember to consider your purpose when you analyze sources: is your research paper supposed to be argumentative or expository? Has the source you've been reading written to inform, or to persuade? What kind of bias might the source have? What evidence does the source present to support its claims? You don't necessarily have to explicitly answer all of these questions in each annotation, but they are all questions worth keeping in mind as you evaluate each of your sources.

Considering a Source's Usefulness

If you're writing an annotated bibliography as a step in the process of writing a research paper, another thing you should do with each source is consider how it will be useful for your purposes specifically. This can help you not only with finding sources, but also with developing a solid outline that takes your research into account.

For each source, you should consider how the information is related to *your* central idea, and which of your key points will be supported by it. You should begin to have a plan for what your key points will be, and the annotated bibliography is an opportunity to decide how to support those points.

Formatting a Bibliography

There are some general guidelines for formatting an annotated bibliography, but you should always check with your instructor to see if they have any specific rules. In general, an annotated bibliography contains a series of source listings, followed by annotations. The sources should be alphabetized and formatted with a half-inch hanging indent, and the annotations should be flush with the hanging indent, *not* with the margin. Only the first line of each source listing should be flush with the left margin. Your source citations should follow whatever format your paper your paper. Always follow the instructions of the assignment.

Your annotations may consist of multiple paragraphs (unless your instructor specifies otherwise), but paragraphs in an annotated bibliography do not have an indent on the first line; *all* text in the annotation should be flush with the hanging indent of the source citation. Annotations should be written in third-person point of view (that is, instead of saying, “I could use this source for ...,” say something like “This source could be useful for ...”). Make sure to format your bibliography correctly, but also be thorough and focus on your analysis *before* you concern yourself with the format; the annotated bibliography is for *your* benefit, so write it in a way that will be easy for you to understand.

This is an example of a properly formatted entry for an annotated bibliography. Note that this example contains an MLA citation; make sure you use the correct citation style for your paper.

Lemons, Jane Fullerton. “Vaccine Controversies.” *CQ Researcher*, vol. 26, no. 8, 19 Feb. 2016, pp. 169-192.
library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/cqresrre2016021900

Lemons’s report provides a detailed, comprehensive breakdown of modern vaccine hesitancy. In the report, Lemons discusses the various facets of the issues surrounding vaccines, including the scientific consensus, the history of vaccines, public opinion, state regulations, and case law. The author is very thorough in explaining the facts simply. The facts of the report seem to indicate that the primary controversy is not a contest of “pro-vaccine” versus “anti-vaccine,” but rather as a question of whether or not vaccination should be mandatory. This article could be useful in a variety of discussions about vaccines; it provides not only useful statistics, but also important context to accompany them.

This example provides all three parts of a bibliography annotation: a brief summary of the article’s contents (“In the report, Lemons discusses...”), an analysis of its implications (“The facts of the report seem to indicate ...”), and an evaluation of its potential usefulness (“This article could be useful in ...”). Evaluating each source this way – and leaving yourself a written record of these evaluations in the form of an annotated bibliography – will help you employ your research to maximum effect in your paper.