What is an Annotated Bibliography (or Annotated List of Works Cited) and how do you prepare one?

Why do an annotated bibliography?

Teachers that assign students research papers or projects often require their students to do an annotated bibliography. An annotated bibliography is a useful way to start a research project because it asks you to collect and summarize sources that you might use later in a research paper. Just collecting sources for a bibliography is useful, but when you have to write annotations for each source, you are forced to read each source more carefully—not just collect the information. The purpose of a research paper is to state and develop a thesis that is thought-provoking, of interest, and debatable. Collecting and summarizing sources early in the research process helps you narrow your research topic and formulate a good thesis statement. Creating an annotated bibliography can help you gain a good perspective on your topic. By reading and analyzing a variety of sources, you will begin to know what the issues are and help you to develop your own point of view about a topic.

What exactly is an annotated bibliography?

A bibliography is a list of sources (books, journals, websites, periodicals, etc.) used for researching a topic. (Bibliographies are sometimes called “Works Cited.”) A bibliography usually just includes the bibliographic information (i.e., the author, title, city of publication, publisher, year of publication, and form of media).

An annotation is a summary or evaluation. Therefore, an annotated bibliography lists the sources and includes some brief information about each source. Your instructor will give specific guidelines as to the type of information he or she would like included with your sources. Depending on the assignment, your annotations may include one of more of the following:

1. **Credibility** - A sentence or two that describes the author’s credentials or purpose.
2. **Summarize** - A brief summary of the sources content. What are the main arguments? What is the point of this book or article? What topics are covered?
3. **Assess** – After summarizing a source, it may be helpful to evaluate it. Does this source apply to your topic? Will it be of use to your research? How does it compare to other sources in your bibliography? Is the information reliable? Is your source biased or objective? What is the author’s goal?
4. **Reflect** - A sentence at the end of the summary that explains why this source seems valuable and how you might use it.

Format

Students at Cary Academy are taught MLA formatting for their bibliography (or works cited page). For help with formatting, please see our handout titled: Basic MLA Citation Guide or Middle School MLA Citation Guide.

The annotation for each source will follow the bibliographic information and can be written in paragraph form. The length of the annotation should be kept brief; however, it will vary depending on the type of information your instructor requires. Remember this is a summary—save the extra details for your paper. A few sentences of general summary followed by several sentences about how it will benefit your paper or project should be sufficient. However, be sure to ask your instructor for the specific guidelines he or she wants you to use.

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MLA Example
(This example is taken from Cornell University Library, Olin Library Reference Research & Learning Services, Ithaca, NY)

This example uses the MLA format for a journal citation. NOTE: Standard MLA practice requires double spacing within citations.


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

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Works Cited:

These works were consulted in creating this handout.


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