



# How to Prepare an Annotated Bibliography

**This guide will explain the annotated bibliography and how to prepare one.**

## What is an Annotated Bibliography?

An annotated bibliography is a list of sources on a certain topic with a brief description of each source. It is unlike the *literature review*. For more about how to write a literature review, see the Library Guide “**How to Write a Literature Review**.”

In the annotated bibliography, the bibliographic information (source citation) is followed by an annotation, which can be a few sentences or a lengthy paragraph that describes (or in some cases, also evaluates) the contents of the source. Each annotation is usually about 150 words. The purpose of the annotation is to inform the reader of the relevance, accuracy, and quality of the sources cited. If you have questions about how detailed or evaluative the annotations should be, ask your instructor.

## Descriptive vs. Evaluative (Conclusive) Annotations

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.

Contrast the following annotations to see the difference between the first, which is simply descriptive, and the second, which is conclusive (citations appear in the APA format):

Carson, R. (1962). The obligation to endure. In *Silent spring* (pp. 5-13). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Carson talks about the overuse of chemicals to kill insects and other pests that invade and harm the nation's environment and agriculture. She thinks that chemicals that people once thought would control disease in plants are now going to cause another worse kind of disease in humans. She uses some history and current realities to back up her points.

Carson, R. (1962). The obligation to endure. In *Silent spring* (pp. 5-13). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Carson, in this chapter from *Silent Spring*, claims that chemical pollution, especially in the form of pesticides, is "the most alarming of all man's assaults upon the environment" (152). Modern science's creation of new chemicals (almost five hundred a day) and their subsequent use--two hundred of them alone used to kill pests of all kinds--have begun to alter the biological environment irrevocably, so that nuclear warfare is no longer the most certain means of wiping out life on the planet. Instead, the real killer becomes the many poisons we use to wipe out pests. These already are causing and will cause ultimately all kinds of genetic alterations in plant and animal life that will bring about the end of life as we know it. Carson does not advocate a complete end to chemical pest control, but she does insist that chemicals should be used only after they have been thoroughly investigated, tested, and understood. And then they should be used only by those who understand how to use them and their potential for both benefit and harm.

The second annotation is longer than the first, but it is also evaluative. A descriptive annotation is simply a list topics an author talks about, while an evaluative annotation states conclusively what the author thought about, how he/she thought about it, and what it finally meant for the piece of writing he/she produced. Ask your instructor how you should write your annotations.

## The Process

1. First, locate and record citations to books, periodicals, and documents that may contain useful information on your topic. Briefly examine and review the actual items. Then choose those works that provide a variety of perspectives on your topic.
2. Cite the book, article, or document using the appropriate style (MLA, APA, Turabian—see next page.)
3. You may wish to ask your instructor about how to write your annotations, however the following is a general approach: 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.

## Critically Appraising the Book, Article, or Document

For guidance in critically appraising and analyzing the sources for your bibliography, see the Library Guide "**Evaluating Sources.**" For help finding reviews of books, see the Library Guide "**How to Find Book Reviews**". For information on the author's background and views, ask at the reference desk for suggestions of appropriate biographical reference materials.

## Choosing the Correct Format for the Citations

Each entry in an annotated bibliography should include all the information normally included in a list of works cited. For instance, the citation for a book would include the title, author, publisher, place of publication, and year of publication. Use the appropriate bibliographic format for citations (such as MLA, APA, Turabian) as specified by your instructor.

The Library Guide **How to Cite Electronic Resources** is available. Style manuals for some other formats are also kept at the reference desk. Check with your instructor to find out which style is preferred for your class.

## Sample Annotated Bibliography Entries for a Journal Article

The following example uses the APA format for the journal citation:

Goldschneider, F. K., Waite, L. J., & Witsberger, C. (1986). Nonfamily living and the erosion of traditional family orientations among young adults. *American Sociological Review*, 51, 541-554.

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.

This example uses Turabian style for the description of the book:

Garrow, David J. *Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King and the Voting Rights Act of 1965*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978.

Garrow describes how the strategy of protest employed by Martin Luther King, Jr., and SCLC at Selma influenced the emergence of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. He contends that the choice of Selma as a site for civil rights protests and the specific tactics that SCLC adopted in Selma were part of a plan to force the introduction and passage of national voting rights legislation. The foremost consideration in this campaign was the need to elicit "unprovoked white violence aimed at peaceful and unresisting civil rights demonstrators." Garrow argues that at Selma "a strategy that bordered on nonviolent provocation supplanted the earlier belief in nonviolent persuasion." SCLC correctly assumed that police violence would generate national media coverage and this, in turn, would stimulate reactions "throughout the country, and especially Washington," leading to pressure for federal voting rights legislation.

(This example from: *The Civil Rights Movement: References and Resources*, by Paul T. Murray. New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1993.)

## Other Helpful Sources of Information

Often it is helpful to look at examples of annotated bibliographies, and the Salmon Library has many books containing annotated bibliographies. To find some of them in the collection, search the library catalog for the phrase "annotated bibliography", and click the *Search Everything* button.

Also, the following Internet resources may also be helpful:

"The Ethics of Xenotransplantation" -- *Sample annotated bibliography from John Carroll University*

- <http://www.jcu.edu/bible/Students/Reviews/billman.htm>

"On the Ordination of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood" -- *Sample annotated bibliography from John Carroll University*

- <http://www.jcu.edu/bible/400/Annotbib.htm>

More Samples of "Descriptive" versus "Conclusive" (Evaluative) Annotations from Central Michigan University

- <http://www.lib.cmich.edu/ocls/annbib.htm>