Annotated bibliography

An annotated bibliography is a list of secondary sources, each with a one-paragraph summary plus critical evaluation of the source on a specific topic. Regarding the two terms, bibliography refers to the formal citation, and annotation to the summary plus critical appraisal. Researchers have two aims for the annotated bibliography: composing a comprehensive literature review and compiling a catalogue of insights and perspectives on the topic. Research writers follow a formal writing style that is clear, concise, and in the third person, for the assumed audience is the research community of fellow researchers, including oneself and anyone investigating the same or similar topic. Regarding formatting, writers include a title (similar to an essay), order sources alphabetically by authors’ last names, use an appropriate citation style, such as CMS, MLA, or APA, and cite quotations in the annotation using parenthetical citation. For distinguishing secondary sources from primary or tertiary sources, please see Turabian, §3.1.

Writing an annotated bibliography involves a three-step process: (A) research for finding the secondary sources, (B) documentation for recording the bibliography, and (C) writing the annotation of summary plus critical evaluation, as outlined below.

A. **Research recent and relevant secondary sources on the topic.** Recent in the humanities means within ten years, though often older for excellent, landmark, and seminal secondary sources. Relevant means quality sources addressing the research question. It is best to skim-read introductions to many sources and then to use critical skills to choose quality sources providing a broad understanding of the topic from multiple perspectives.

B. **Document the secondary sources** using the appropriate style of citation for preparing the list of works cited. The bibliography follows works-cited formatting, including hanging paragraphs. The annotation follows the pattern of a regular paragraph with the first line indented five spaces (see examples below).

C. **Write a four-part annotation** in brief format (about 5-8 sentences or 100-160 words), applying a concise writing style along with citing quotations in parentheses. The annotation has four parts in the following order:

1. **Identification of writer’s credentials and critical approach.** Begin the annotation by identifying the writer’s name, professional credentials, and school of interpretation or critical approach. If the author is anonymous, then name the editor or the publication as the authority and perspective.

2. **Summary of thesis and evidence.** The summary, above all else, should state the work’s thesis, or argument, with a recap of interesting evidence and reasons supporting the thesis. It is a good practice to quote statements that you may wish to use later in your writing process.

3. **Evaluation of source’s quality.** The critical evaluation appraises the source’s quality and perspective according to the following five questions:
   - **Who is the writer?** What is the writer’s title, credentials, or experience for addressing the topic? Consider the credibility of the publication outlet. You may need to Google the writer’s name.
   - **What is the author’s perspective?** Discern the author’s school of interpretation (the critical approach, literary theory, or methodology) generating the argument and reason for writing.
   - **What is the genre and purpose?** A book, an article, a review, an editorial summary, a report of scientific research, a summary of a number of other sources? What is the purpose of the text?
   - **Who is the intended audience?** Consider where the text is published, whether the text is intended for a general, specialized, or academic audience, and how argumentative the text is.
   - **What media is it?** Name the source: a book, journal article, specialized encyclopedia article, magazine or newspaper article, web site or web-blog (and what kind of site).

**Evaluation of source’s usefulness.** How helpful is the source for your selected research topic? Conclude your annotation with one sentence or one clause evaluating how useful the source seems to be for understanding your topic or addressing your research question.
Why start research with an A.Bib.? 

Why should one start research with an annotated bibliography?

Research should help writers accomplish three important aims: (a) situate one’s argument in its proper scholarly conversation, based on a literature review of secondary sources, which, in turn, is based on research done for an annotated bibliography; (b) write counterarguments against major opposing viewpoints, also representing other viewpoints accurately; (c) improve one’s core argument based on insights and evidence from both primary and secondary literature. For the research-writing process, writing an “ABib” helps accomplish these three aims.

What process do research writers follow to search for sources?

- **Survey the field**: researchers first do background reading to survey and summarize the field or topic.
- **Search for problems**: researchers take note of where the debates lie and the puzzles or *aporia* (*ἀπορία*), seeking to understand and categorize them; from this survey of answers and problems, researchers develop the wide perspective to contextualize and situate their own developing hypothesis.
- **Focus on a question**: researchers then focus on a particular research question or problem, seeking to find out (a) how others have answered the question, (b) what general problems or gaps exist among given answers or solutions, and (c) what relevant insights may be useful for writing one’s own argument.

What criteria do research writers use in selecting sources?

Research writing is only as valuable as the quality of sources consulted, so research writers want to be discerning and exacting when selecting their secondary sources, generally using the following guidelines:

- **Recent**: the more recent the better: within five years in the social sciences; within ten years in the humanities but possibly older sources depending on the topic and the quality of and availability of sources; landmark and seminal sources may be much older but used to provide background information and context.
- **Relevant**: related to and useful both for the chosen topic and for the audience, where *useful* means credible and contributing to multiple points of view; sources should relate and possibly respond to one another, giving a sense of the on-going conversation.
  - **Quality**: major voices, careful researchers, and insightful analysts deemed credible by experts; published by respectable outlets and peer-reviewed journals; demonstrating high standards of research; showing accuracy and fairness in representing and responding to other perspectives.
  - **Variety**: multiple points of view; not biased toward one political, religious, or critical perspective, but a variety of quality secondary sources and perspectives.

What tips and practices are helpful when searching for sources?

- **Databases**: Identify the best available research databases and search engines for the chosen field and topic.
- **Key words**: Start with key words when searching databases; mix key words to limit searches.
- **Citation notes**: Keep track of sources by typing citation information into a draft bibliography page; write notes about whether a source looks relevant and useful.
- **Find twice as many sources as needed.**
- **Save articles in electronic files on a flash or computer drive along with sufficient citation information.**
- **Type (do not cut and paste) citation information when writing the annotated bibliography.**
- **What practical tips have you learned for searching for sources?**

Nota Bene (note well): Do not copy or paraphrase abstracts, neither those written by authors nor any supplied by an electronic database company. You must write the annotation in your own words and shape it to your specific research topic. Copying an abstract is not only considered an act of plagiarism, a breach of trust, but also results in a poor quality and off-focus annotation.
A. Bib. tips

Q: What is an annotated bibliography?

An annotated bibliography is a list of citations to books, articles, web sites, and other sources. Each citation is followed by an annotation: a brief description and evaluation in paragraph form intended to inform readers (other researchers) of the accuracy, quality, and relevance of the source to the specific research topic.

Q: How is an annotation different from a summary or abstract?

An abstract or summary is just descriptive. An annotation is both descriptive and evaluative.

Q: What are the steps in creating an annotated bibliography?

Creating an annotated bibliography will require that you use a variety of intellectual skills: evaluation, analysis, classification, and careful research.

The first step is to locate and record citations of books, journal articles, magazine articles, and newspapers articles, and web sites on your topic. Briefly examine and review the actual items, then select those resources that provide the best information on your topic.

Second, cite the book, article, or other resource using the appropriate style of documentation, alphabetically arranged, just as it will appear in a works cited page.

Third, write a concise, one-paragraph annotation that includes three features:

1) A short evaluative summary of the source: identify the author, then read for the thesis and how the source supports it;
2) A statement of the source’s quality in terms of authority, accuracy, currency, coverage, perspective, and scholarly apparatus;
3) An evaluation of the source’s relevance and value to your research topic.

Q: Where can one find additional assistance?

Two helpful web sites are these:

Directions for Preparing an Annotated Bibliography (Writing Center at Purdue University):

- http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/614/01/

How to Prepare an Annotated Bibliography (Library at Cornell University):

- http://olinuris.library.cornell.edu/ref/research/skill28.htm

Q: Where can one find a sample annotated bibliography?

On the following page are three sample entries of an annotated bibliography, formatted according to CMS (Turabian) parenthetical citation and, as always, in alphabetical order. Annotated bibliographies in academic contexts are usually double-spaced, but the following sample is single-spaced to save space and paper.
A.Bib. sample

Rhetorical Analysis of Milton’s Epic Poems


In a landmark study, Professor Broadbent of King’s College, Cambridge, makes a now-classic claim: Milton was “the last great practitioner of rhetoric” (224), and as such, created a new type of epic, one based predominately on rhetorical figures, schemes, and structures. In a “pioneering demonstration” (Sloane), Broadbent effectively establishes his thesis by diagramming several hundred lines from Milton’s poems and analyzing them with Greek and Latin rhetorical terms, indicating, as he writes, “how far Milton used rhetorical devises to decorate the blankness of his verse” (230). Broadbent theorizes, “I think it true though, that as a poet he came to trust less and less in art” and more in “rhetorical figures” for argument and structure. “Rhetorical verse” Milton uses thematically, dramatically, and structurally; for instance, in *Paradise Regain’d*, Milton uses rhetoric “to expound theology, to distinguish characters, and to choose sides” (234). Broadbent provides useful examples and detailed comments on how Milton applied rhetoric to his poetry.


Ryan J. Stark, Professor of English at Penn State, argues that Milton portrays two types of rhetorical “frigidity” in *Paradise Lost*: demonic and newly scientific “cold styles,” spoken respectively by the host of devils in their fallen city of Pandemonium and by Adam in his attempt at quantifying the cosmos. Stark’s thesis concerns Milton’s critique of the new science, in Stark’s words: “arrogant grandeur always produces a chill, because it has at its core a kind of cold-heartedness” (26). In Milton’s poems, the cold style signifies both “fallen” and “detached” attitudes that produce cold speech. Notably, the term “frigidity” derives from Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* 3.3 and Longinus’s concept of *psychrotita* (21). Milton applies this cold style to demonic speech in the coldness of hell and to Adam’s language when he adopts the disinterested, scientific attitude toward creation. Stark applies his rhetorical training to Milton’s poetics of pathos in a fascinating analysis of style. Stark’s essay, including detailed endnotes and full bibliography, has direct and helpful implications for reading Milton’s epic poems through a lens of rhetorical criticism.


Kathleen M. Swaim, Professor of English at Emory University, compares and contrasts Raphael’s narration in Books 5-8 of *Paradise Lost* and Michael’s narration in Books 11-12. Swaim argues that the two angelic visitors (both doctors of divinity) present educational discourses reflecting the epistemic dichotomy of the prelapsarian and postlapsarian worlds, and their two discourses satisfy the differing educational principles that Adam and Eve need as innocent and later fallen pupils. Swaim’s thesis is that these blocks of text via the angelic teachers “fulfill the epic’s generic responsibility to include (all) the learning of the culture it represents” (ix). This summary of rhetorical pedagogy provides classical and Christian educations: whereas Raphael’s rhetorical pedagogy is humanistic “improvement,” Michael’s reeducation is Christian “amendment” (27). Swaim supports her thesis with five chapters, including one called “Lapsarian Logic” that helpfully summarizes and applies Milton’s Ramist-style logic: “As vertical hierarchies govern Raphael’s reasoning and content, so such horizontal Method governs Michael’s” (158). Swaim provides thorough scholarship, including thirty-two pages of endnotes, a twelve-page bibliography, and a helpful index, and she provides insights of how rhetorical concerns relate to the epic’s didactic design.