

Preparing an Annotated Bibliography

Below are some excellent handouts from three different universities on the preparation of annotated bibliographies.

1. "Annotated Bibliography (Modern Language Association)," from the University of South Carolina Aiken Writing Room.

A bibliography lists the sources used in a paper. The bibliography gives all the information a reader would need in order to find the sources quickly and easily.

The following examples are bibliographies using the MLA style.

Example:

Chellis, Barbara A. "Those Extraordinary Twins: Negroes and Whites." American Quarterly 21 (1969): 100-12.

An annotated bibliography goes one step further. Along with providing basic bibliographical information, it provides a brief summary of the main points or arguments of a source.

Example:

Chellis, Barbara A. "Those Extraordinary Twins: Negroes and Whites." American Quarterly 21 (1969): 100-12.

Chellis sees Pudd'nhead Wilson as an exposure of "the fiction of law and custom" that has justified distinctions between blacks and whites. Chellis notes that Twain develops his theme through his characterizations of Roxy, Tom, and Chambers. According to Chellis, Roxy's "crime" – condemning the real Tom to slavery – stems not from the influence of her race but from that of her white values. As the author points out, Tom is spoiled and selfish – the kind of person produced by white society's values. She maintains that the invalidity of race distinctions is further pointed out through the servility of Chambers, who is white, and that black "servility" is ultimately seen to be nothing more than the result of training (100-112).

2. "How to Prepare an Annotated Bibliography," from Michael Engle, Amy Blumenthal, and Tony Cosgrave at the Olin and Uris Libraries, Cornell University.

[Online at <http://www.library.cornell.edu/olinuris/ref/research/skill28.htm>]

3. Writing an Annotated Bibliography, from Prof. Derek P. Royal for ENG 599: Bibliography and Methods of Research at Texas A&M.

Much of what is below can be found in James L. Harner's *On Compiling an Annotated Bibliography* (2nd edition), perhaps the single best source on writing an extended annotated bibliography.

Before you get started, you need to decide on several preliminary issues. Harner suggests that you do the following:

1. Reexamine your author or subject carefully and make sure you are very familiar with the issues, themes, and potential controversies involved.
2. Decide what kind of sources you will include in your annotated bibliography. For instance, you need to decide if you will only include English language works (which may critically limit your bibliography); whether or not you will include annotations of book reviews, even brief ones; if it's necessary to include unpublished dissertations in your bibliography (and for some, you just might need to); if you're going to include works that are outright misdirected or even outrageous (in some cases you might); whether or not you should include less scholarly and more popular references to your author or topic; and how you will deal with Web-based resources.
3. If applicable, you may need to announce your project via a scholarly forum. For instance, if you advertise your project in a journal or on a listserv, you might find other scholars who can give you advice or who have direct knowledge of your subject area.
4. Decide on an appropriate style manual, familiarize yourself with it, and *strictly* adhere to its guidelines.

There are three basic ways of organizing your bibliographical entries, and each comes with its own advantages and disadvantages:

1. Alphabetically by author

Ø Advantages: in shorter annotated bibliographies that cover only 10-25 entries, this can be an easy way for readers to find your information.

∅ Disadvantages: in longer bibliographies, it can be cumbersome for readers to have to look through all of your entries according to the author's name. Since readers will probably be looking at the *content* of your entries, listing them by *author* may not contribute to readability. If you do have a long list alphabetized by author, please make sure the *wording* of your annotation is clear and meticulous, so as to make indexing and hypertext linking easier.

2. Chronologically by the date of publication

∅ Advantages: listing entries this way is appropriate when you want to emphasize that scholarship on your topic has developed in a particular historical manner with different stages. You may also want to list chronologically if your bibliographic focus isn't on just one work or topic.

∅ Disadvantages: if chronological development isn't important to your topic, then a large list organized in this manner may not be the clearest way of presenting your information. As with alphabetical listings, keep in mind that the *wording* of your annotation is very important here, one that will allow easy indexing and hypertext linking.

3. Topically by subject or theme

∅ Advantages: this kind of organization would be appropriate if you're working with an author who has written in several genres or when the scholarship you're citing focuses on individual works, multiple authors, or distinct topics. For longer, more extensive annotated bibliographies, this style may be most useful.

∅ Disadvantages: arrangement by topic subject may not work with shorter bibliographies. And if you have a long list organized in this manner, you need to make sure that your annotations are carefully worded. With multiple sub-topics, readings might find your presentation a little confusing without adequate indexing/hyperlinking. Also, using this method may deemphasize historical development, if that is important to your work.

According to Harner, there are three major steps to compiling your bibliographic entries: identifying the scholarly works, obtaining them, and writing the entries.

1. Identify the scholarly works

∅ Survey existing bibliographies and reference works and determine which ones you will need to use extensively. These will include not only the most obvious reference sources (e.g., *MLA International Bibliography, Annual*

Bibliography of English Language and Literature, Modern Language Studies), but also specialized ones that focus on a particular author, topic, genre, or theme.

Ø Decide on the order in which you plan on searching the bibliographies. You may want to begin with those focusing on your particular author or subject, then broaden your search to look at more general bibliographies and databases.

Ø Become thoroughly acquainted with the reference works or databases you investigate. Every bibliographical work has its own format and organization, and to save yourself a lot of headache later on you should take some time to look at the introductory or explanatory material, if any, to each of your resources.

Ø Keep careful records of all of your bibliographical entries, including information on where you found them. You will discover that many of the references sources you look at will overlap in content. Knowing what you've already found, and where you found it, can save you a lot of time. You don't want to be repeating your notes or entries throughout your project. So as you research your reference sources, consult your master list in order to avoid duplication.

Ø If you come across any vague, ambiguous, or what may at first appear to be useless information, don't automatically discard it. You might want to investigate it further to see if it's something that might actually be pertinent to your research.

2. Obtain the material

Ø Start with your own library (either through physical holdings or full-text databases) and see what materials they have.

Ø If your library does not have a particular journal article or book that you need, request the item from interlibrary loan. *Please keep in mind that some items may take a long time to acquire, so do not wait until the last minute to request your source. As soon as you find that your library does not have the journal article or book, order it.*

Ø If there are libraries that you are willing to travel to, check out their holdings online (if available). This may be a quicker and more efficient way than requesting things via interlibrary loan (especially if you need more than two or three sources from the same library).

Ø If you can't obtain a copy of your source from your own library or through interlibrary loan, you can try the following:

- o Write directly to the publisher of the book or the journal and see if you can purchase a copy. Publishers may even have copies of out of print books or older journal volumes.
 - o If a work is too fragile or rare to be loaned, ask a library if you can purchase a microfilm or photocopy of the work.
 - o Write to other scholars who have cited the work and see if they will send you a photocopy or summary of the text, if they have a copy.
 - o Try and contact the author of the source and see if he or she will send you an offprint or photocopy of his/her work.
 - o Write to the library of the sponsoring institution (the college or university that houses the journal, for instance) and see if they can send you a copy or give you more information on how to find it.
- Ø Obtaining dissertations can be rather costly, especially if your project rests heavily on them. In some cases you may have to rely on dissertation abstracts, such as those found in *Dissertation Abstracts International*.
3. **Write the entries**
- Ø As you begin to obtain your works, start writing your entries. This way you won't feel bogged down by having to write all of your entries at the same time.
- Ø Read your source *carefully* and *completely*. Do not merely rely on brief summaries or abstracts, if they are available.
- Ø Along with this, it is important to take extensive notes—if not begin writing the entry—soon after you receive and then read your source. It will be fresh in your mind at this point, and this way you can avoid having to reread your source at a latter date because you forgot the content or are unable to make sense of your slim notes on it.
- Ø Be familiar with your style manual. Whether you use *MLA*, *Chicago*, *APA*, or some other style manual, it is important to feel comfortable with your style so that you won't have to keep looking up the most basic organizational information.
- Ø Decide on your taxonomy, or the specific words you will choose to use in your annotations. Think in terms of subject headings or sub-topics. These words will be keys to an effective index or hyperlink.

Ø Determine which kind of annotation you will write. There are two basic types of annotation, paraphrase or commentary:

o In a paraphrase entry, you are succinctly rewording what the author has said without any commentary as to what the author is doing. With this style you should write in complete, grammatically correct sentences.

o In a commentary entry, you are “commenting” on what the author has done in the work. You may even find it necessary to make a judgment as to the author’s focus, approach, or conclusions (but remember to develop a professional tone). In commentary annotations, your sentences can be subjectless (for example, “Using Cixous’s binary approach, argues that Updike’s female characters are nothing more than caricatures that merely showcase Rabbit’s more positive qualities.”)

Ø Be consistent in your style of presentation. Do not mix paraphrase with commentary annotations.

Ø As a rule, in your annotations use the historical present tense.

Ø Avoid the passive voice.

Ø Vary your word usage and style, and do not overuse certain annotation verbs such as “discusses” and “examines” (see Harner 45-48 for a list of verb suggestions).

Ø Above all, your annotation should get to the heart of your source and distill the essence of the author’s work.