

What is an Annotated Bibliography and how do I make one?

Evaluating Sources: Overview

The world is full of information to be found--however, not all of it is valid, useful, or accurate. Evaluating sources of information that you are considering using in your writing is an important step in any research activity.

The quantity of information available is so staggering that we cannot know everything about a subject. For example, it's estimated that anyone attempting to research what's known about depression would have to read over 100,000 studies on the subject. And there's the problem of trying to decide which studies have produced reliable results.

Similarly, for information on other topics, not only is there a huge quantity available but a very uneven level of quality. You don't want to rely on the news in the headlines of sensational tabloids near supermarket checkout counters, and it's just as hard to know how much to accept of what's in all the books, magazines, pamphlets, newspapers, journals, brochures, web sites, and various media reports that are available. People want to convince you to buy their products, agree with their opinions, rely on their data, vote for their candidate, consider their perspective, or accept them as experts. In short, you have to sift and make decisions all the time, and you want to make responsible choices that you won't regret.

Evaluating sources is an important skill. It's been called an art as well as work--much of which is detective work. You have to decide where to look, what clues to search for, and what to accept. You may be overwhelmed with too much information or too little. **The temptation is to accept whatever you find. But don't be tempted.** Learning how to evaluate effectively is a skill you need both for your course papers and your life.

When writing research papers and annotated bibliographies, you will also be evaluating sources as you search for information. You will need to make decisions about what to search for, where to look, and once you've found material on your topic, if it is a valid or useful source for your writing.

When researching, you must indicate exactly where you found whatever material you use – whether facts, opinions, and/or quotations. An Annotated Bibliography includes your source citations as well as a descriptive and evaluative comment about each source. In the source write-up, you will need to address the following:

1. Explain the main purpose of the work
2. Briefly describe the contents
3. Discuss reliability
4. Indicate the possible audience for the work
5. Note any special features
6. Warn of any weakness or suspected bias
7. Explain if the source was helpful to you-why or why not

Definitions

A **bibliography** is a list of sources (books, journals, websites, periodicals, etc.) one has used for researching a topic. Bibliographies are sometimes called "references" or "works cited" depending on the style format you are using. A bibliography usually just includes the bibliographic information (i.e., the author, title, publisher, etc.).

An **annotation** is a summary and/or evaluation.

Therefore, an **annotated bibliography** includes a summary and/or evaluation of each of the sources. Depending on your project or the assignment, your annotations may do one or more of the following:

- **Summarize:** Some annotations merely summarize the source. What are the main arguments? What is the point of this book or article? What topics are covered? If someone asked what this article/book is about, what would you say? The length of your annotations will determine how detailed your summary is.
- **Assess:** After summarizing a source, it may be helpful to evaluate it. Is it a useful source? How does it compare with other sources in your bibliography? Is the information reliable? Is it this source biased or objective? What is the goal of this source?
- **Reflect:** Once you've summarized and assessed a source, you need to ask how it fits into your research. Was this source helpful to you? How does it help you shape your argument? How can you use this source in your research project? Has it changed how you think about your topic?

Your annotated bibliography may include some of these, all of these, or even others. If you're doing this for a class, you should get specific guidelines from your instructor.

Why should I write an annotated bibliography?

To learn about your topic: Writing an annotated bibliography is excellent preparation for a research project. Just collecting sources for a bibliography is useful, but when you have to write annotations for each source, you're forced to read each source more carefully. You begin to read more critically instead of just collecting information. At the professional level, annotated bibliographies allow you to see what has been done in the literature and where your own research or scholarship can fit. To help you formulate a thesis: Every good research paper is an argument. The purpose of research is to state and support a thesis. So a very important part of research is developing a thesis that is debatable, interesting, and current. Writing an annotated bibliography can help you gain a good perspective on what is being said about your topic. By reading and responding to a variety of sources on a topic, you'll start to see what the issues are, what people are arguing about, and you'll then be able to develop your own point of view.

To help other researchers: Extensive and scholarly annotated bibliographies are sometimes published. They provide a comprehensive overview of everything important that has been and is being said about that topic. You may not ever get your annotated bibliography published, but as a researcher, you might want to look for one that has been published about your topic.

Format

The format of an annotated bibliography can vary, so if you're doing one for a class, it's important to ask for specific guidelines.

The bibliographic information: Generally, though, the bibliographic information of the source (the title, author, publisher, date, etc.) is written in either MLA or APA format. For more help consult the *Write for College* book in your culminating project classroom.

The annotations: The annotations for each source are written in paragraph form. The lengths of the annotations can vary significantly from a couple of sentences to a couple of pages. The length will depend on the purpose. If you're just writing summaries of your sources, the annotations may not be very long. However, if you are writing an extensive analysis of each source, you'll need more space.

You can focus your annotations for your own needs. A few sentences of general summary followed by several sentences of how you can fit the work into your larger paper or project can serve you well when you go to draft.

Remember that this is formal writing. Your final document will need to be edited and error free.

The following is a good example of an entry from an annotated bibliography.

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

This professional article was published in the premier sociological magazine. It is reliable primary research, and easily readable. 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 shows no significant gender differences in sex role attitudes as a result of nonfamily living. This article is extremely useful to researchers interested in the effects of nonfamily living of both genders.

Evaluating Bibliographic Citations

When searching for information in library catalogues and online article databases such as *EbscoHost* or *Proquest Direct*, you will first find a bibliographic citation entry. A bibliographic citation provides relevant information about the author and publication as well as short summary of the text.

Before you read a source or spend time hunting for it, begin by looking at the following information in the citation to evaluate whether it's worth finding or reading.

Consider the author, the title of the work, the summary, where it is, and the timeliness of the entry. You may also want to look at the keywords to see what other categories the work falls into. Evaluate this information to see if it is relevant and valid for your research.

Evaluation During Reading

After you have asked yourself some questions about the source and determined that it's worth your time to find and read the source, you can evaluate the material in the source as you read through it.

- Read the preface--what does the author want to accomplish? Browse through the table of contents and the index. This will give you an overview of the source. Is your topic covered in enough depth to be helpful? If you don't find your topic discussed, try searching for some synonyms in the index.
- Check for a list of references or other citations that look as if they will lead you to related material that would be good sources.
- Determine the intended audience. Are you the intended audience? Consider the tone, style, level of information, and assumptions the author makes about the reader. Are they appropriate for your needs?

- Try to determine if the content of the source is fact, opinion, or propaganda. If you think the source is offering facts, are the sources for those facts clearly indicated?
- Do you think there's enough evidence offered? Is the coverage comprehensive? (As you learn more and more about your topic, you will notice that this gets easier as you become more of an expert.)
- Is the language objective or emotional?
- Are there broad generalizations that overstate or oversimplify the matter?
- Does the author use a good mix of primary and secondary sources for information?
- If the source is opinion, does the author offer sound reasons for adopting that stance? (Consider again those questions about the author. Is this person reputable?)
- Check for accuracy.
- How timely is the source? Is the source 20 years out of date? Some information becomes dated when new research is available, but other older sources of information can be quite sound 50 or 100 years later.
- Do some cross-checking. Can you find some of the same information given elsewhere?
- How credible is the author? If the document is anonymous, what do you know about the organization?
- Are there vague or sweeping generalizations that aren't backed up with evidence?
- Are arguments very one-sided with no acknowledgement of other viewpoints?

Evaluating Print vs. Internet Sources

With the advent of the World Wide Web, we are seeing a massive influx of digital texts and sources. Understanding the difference between what you can find on the web and what you can find in more traditional print sources is key.

Some sources such as journal or newspaper articles can be found in both print and digital format. However, much of what is found on the Internet does not have a print equivalent, and hence, has low or no quality standards for publication. Understanding the difference between the types of resources available will help you evaluate what you find.

Publication Process

Print Sources: Traditional print sources go through an extensive publication process that includes editing and article review. The process has fact-checkers, multiple reviewers, and editors to ensure quality of publication.

Internet Sources: Anyone with a computer and access to the Internet can publish a website or electronic document. Most web documents do not have editors, fact-checkers, or other types of reviewers.

Authorship and Affiliations

Print Sources: Print sources clearly indicate who the author is, what organization(s) he or she is affiliated with, and when his or her work was published.

Internet Sources: Authorship and affiliations are difficult to determine on the Internet. Some sites may have author and sponsorship listed, but many do not.

Sources and Quotations

Print Sources: In most traditional publications, external sources of information and direct quotations are clearly marked and identified.

Internet Sources: Sources the author used or referred to in the text may not be clearly indicated in an Internet source.

Bias and Special Interests

Print Sources: While bias certainly exists in traditional publications, printing is more expensive and difficult to accomplish. Most major publishers are out to make a profit and will either not cater to special interest groups or will clearly indicate when they are when they are catering to special interest groups.

Internet Sources: The purpose of the online text may be misleading. A website that appears to be factual may actually be persuasive and/or deceptive.

Author Qualifications

Print Sources: Qualifications of an author are almost always necessary for print sources. Only qualified authors are likely to have their manuscripts accepted for publication.

Internet Sources: Even if the author and purpose of a website can be determined, the qualifications of the author are not always given.

Publication Information

Print Sources: Publication information such as date of publication, publisher, author, and editor are always clearly listed in print publications.

Internet Sources: Dates of publication and timeliness of information are questionable on the internet. Dates listed on websites could be the date posted, date updated, or a date may not be listed at all.

Understand the Difference Between Primary and Secondary Sources

Primary Sources are original words of the scientist, politician, author, or simply stated, the person or people who experienced the event. These sources include novels, speeches, eyewitness accounts, letters, autobiographies, primary source interviews and the like.

Secondary Sources are works about somebody (biography or history) and about their work or about the event, including books and articles about a novel, about a speech or document, or about a scientific finding.

Use the following chart as a guide:

<u>Subject Area</u>	<u>Primary Sources</u>	<u>Secondary Sources</u>
Government / History / Political Science	speeches, writings by the particular person or politician being researched, the <i>Congressional Record</i> , reports of agencies and departments, documents written by the historical figure	newspaper articles, news magazines, political journals and newsletters, journal articles, and history books
Sciences	tools and methods, experiments, findings from tests and experiments, observations discoveries, and test patterns	interpretations and discussions of test data as found in journals and books (scientific books, which are quickly outdated, are less valuable than up-to-date journals
Literary Topics	novels, poems, plays, short stories, letters, diaries, manuscripts, autobiographies	journal articles, reviews, biographies, critical books about writers and their works
Social Sciences	case studies, findings from surveys and questionnaires, reports of social workers, psychiatrists, and laboratory technicians	commentary and evaluation in reports, documents, journal articles and books
Fine Arts	films, paintings, music, sculptures as well as reproductions and synopses of these for research purposes	evaluations / articles in journals, critical reviews, biographies, and critical books about the artists and their works

Above information from:

Lester, James D. *Writing Research Papers: A Complete Guide*. 6th Ed. Harper Collins Pub., 1990.

Thank you to the following sources for providing us with this information. For more information, go to the following links:

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>

<http://www.library.cornell.edu/olinuris/ref/research/skill28.htm>