Annotated Bibliography

What is an annotated bibliography?
Imagine that you are preparing to write a research essay. You have a topic in mind and maybe the beginning of a thesis, but you still have to do more research before you’re ready. Now, imagine that suddenly a friend of yours appears. She tells you that she just wrote an essay on the same topic and already found a bunch of sources that were useful. She then gives you a list of these sources with all the information necessary to go find them—which is great—but even better, she has included a little summary of each source along with a brief explanation as to why the source is useful or not. This list of sources and summaries (known as annotations) is what writers call an annotated bibliography.

What makes a good annotated bibliography?

- **Proper Citations**: Each of your sources must be cited properly according to the required style guide. Most often, English and other Liberal Arts courses make use of MLA while the Sciences such as psychology and nursing use APA. Either way, sources ought to appear in alphabetical order with a hanging indentation (see the APA example below for an example of hanging indentation). You can reference the Writing Center’s MLA and APA handouts or visit other online writing centers such as Purdue OWL at owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2.

- **Strong Summaries**: Each annotation should clearly state the topic, main arguments, and any particularly important examples in the source. The length of summaries will vary according to the length of the source but generally speaking a summary should not be shorter than three sentences.

- **Helpful Evaluation**: The second part of an annotation is the evaluation of the source. When writing this evaluation, think about your own project and consider how this source helps you in completing it. Is the source a good introduction to the current debate surrounding your topic? Does it provide particularly strong or unique arguments? Is it written by one of the leading voices in the subject? Remember that just because a source may disagree with your thesis, that does not make it a bad source. In fact, it may be the perfect thing to include for a counterargument. Any and all of these observations can be included in the evaluation. Generally the evaluation is one to two sentences long.
Examples

MLA

Lamott's book offers honest advice on the nature of a writing life, complete with its insecurities and failures. The chapters in Lamott's book are wry and anecdotal and offer advice on everything from plot development to jealousy, from perfectionism to struggling with one's own internal critic. In the process, Lamott includes writing exercises designed to be both productive and fun. Lamott offers sane advice for those struggling with the anxieties of writing, but her main project seems to be offering the reader a reality check regarding writing, publishing, and struggling with one's own imperfect humanity in the process. Rather than a practical handbook to producing and/or publishing, this text is indispensable because of its honest perspective, its down-to-earth humor, and its encouraging approach. Some of the writing exercises would also be appropriate for generating classroom writing exercises. Students should find Lamott's style both engaging and enjoyable.

APA

In this book of nonfiction based on the journalist's experiential research, Ehrenreich attempts to ascertain whether it is currently possible for an individual to live on a minimum-wage in America. Taking jobs as a waitress, a maid in a cleaning service, and a Walmart sales employee, the author summarizes and reflects on her work, her relationships with fellow workers, and her financial struggles in each situation. An experienced journalist, Ehrenreich is aware of the limitations of her experiment and the ethical implications of her experiential research tactics and reflects on these issues in the text. The author is forthcoming about her methods and supplements her experiences with scholarly research on her places of employment, the economy, and the rising cost of living in America. Ehrenreich’s project is timely, descriptive, and well-researched.

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1 Adapted from Purdue Owl.