

Writing an Annotated Bibliography

An annotated bibliography is:

- A brief account of research that has been done on a given topic.
- An alphabetical list of research sources.
- A concise **summary** of each source's argument.
- An **evaluation** of each source's relevance.
- Possibly one stage in a larger research project, or may be an independent project.

HOW DO I SELECT SOURCES?

The quality and usefulness of your bibliography will depend on your selection of sources. Define the scope of your research carefully so that you can judge which sources to include.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- What **problem or question** am I investigating?
 - Try formulating your topic as a question, or series of questions, in order to define your search more precisely. Find sources that investigate your questions.
- What kind of **material** am I looking for?
 - You may need academic books, academic journal articles, government reports, policy statements, articles from the popular press, primary historical sources, etc.
- Am I finding the **essential sources** on my topic?
 - Read reference lists to identify commonly used sources. Keep an eye out for studies or authors that are referred to several times. Your librarian can guide you in your search.

HOW DO I SUMMARIZE THE ARGUMENT OF A SOURCE?

1. Identify the source's thesis (or research question, or hypothesis). Both the introduction and conclusion are good places to look for the author's main idea.
2. Identify the major method(s) used to investigate the problem(s).
3. Identify major points in the author's argument by looking for repetition of key terms or ideas. Follow these through the text to see how they are developed.
4. Note the main conclusions.
5. Notice if a theory is used. How does the author interpret evidence using this theory?

HOW DO I EVALUATE THE RELEVANCE OF A SOURCE?

1. Identify *why* and *how* you intend to use the source.
 - Are you interested in:
 - The way the research question is framed by theory or a specific context?
 - The way the source investigates the research question (its method)?
 - How the source makes new connections among evidence?
 - Is the source problematic in any way?
 - Does the source gather and analyze evidence (e.g., data, literature) effectively?
 - How does the source's conclusion bear on your own investigation?
2. Make a judgement of the source's contribution to your research.

Adapted from "Writing an Annotated Bibliography", by Deborah Knott, New College Writing Centre. Copyright 2004. All rights reserved. Based on materials originally developed for the Equity Studies Program, New College.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY SAMPLES

Example 1

Pendrill, Charles. *London Life in the 14th Century*. 1925. Reprint, Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1971.

This book is about how in London in the fourteenth century, there was a complex order not just of street cleaners and fines for waste infractions, but also a system of tolls and the establishment of “sworn masons and carpenters of the city,” who were to examine encroachments into the street, as merchants’ stalls tended to grow more and more elaborate.

Points to note

- Appropriate reference style (Chicago).
- "This book is about" is a text cue: description, all about a topic.
- Contents are listed from the source without explanation.
- One very long complex sentence, difficult to comprehend.

Overall, Example 1 is **ineffective**. This descriptive paragraph does not identify, summarize, or evaluate the author’s argument. Identifying the source’s argument is different than listing its contents.

Example 2

Pendrill, Charles. *London Life in the 14th Century*. 1925. Reprint, Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1971.

In this book, Pendrill argues that although Medieval London had a complex system of street cleaners, fines, and tolls in place to deal with waste, this system was unsuccessful because the citizens and tradespeople disregarded it and left their refuse in the streets. His argument differs from Baker’s in that Pendrill admires London’s system, and believes that the reason it did not succeed was a lack of proper enforcement rather than flaws in the system itself. Pendrill’s depth of analysis includes information about the geography of London which is helpful in understanding this case.

Points to note

- Appropriate reference style (Chicago).
- "Pendrill argues" is a text cue: identifies author’s thesis/argument.

- "...*although* Medieval London" signals subordinated structure: background information provides contrast to author's thesis.
- "...differs from Baker's": provides specific context for comparison.
- Ends with judgement of the source's contribution to student's research.

Overall Example 2 is **effective**. It identifies the source's argument and why the source is useful for the student's research.

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