

Notes on Completing an Annotated Bibliography

An annotated bibliography is basically an assignment in “repackaging” information. You should ask yourself four questions as you develop it:

1. For whom am I gathering this information—my peers, my professor, my subordinates?
2. Why do they need this information—to save them the time of reading it, to let them know what they should read, to let them know the usefulness of the information, etc?
3. In what size and shape “packages” do they want the information? Most annotations run about 5-20% of the total paper (a 1000-word article is usually annotated in about 50-200 words, but a 300-page book may take 500-700 words). Your readers’ expectations will also determine what documentation style you should use: do the readers expect MLA style, APA, Chicago, CSE, or some other retrieval form?
4. What role do my readers expect me to play in these annotations? Am I expected to just report what’s there, or am I supposed to use my knowledge to evaluate the source and discuss its relevance, value, and applicability?

Once you have answered these questions (refer to your assignment, if you have one), you can begin your search for sources. Because you have answered the first two questions, you’ll be able to select those sources that best suit the needs of your particular audience. Because you have answered the third question, you’ll be able to decide how long your annotation needs to be. Usually it’s best to write a longer annotation than you need and then shorten it—this keeps you from leaving out essential information. Finally, because you have answered the fourth question, you’ll know whether to leave the entries as summaries of information or to insert your own opinion or evaluation, like a mini book or article review.

Format:

Your readers’ needs will also determine the format for your annotations; check with your professor about double- or single-spacing, for example. Usually, you will place the retrieval information (author, date, title of work, publisher) first, and you will double-space it just like you would for a “Works Cited” page in a final paper. Then double-space, and present your annotation (which should also be double-spaced). The following is a sample that was written for an advanced composition class that used single-spacing; the student was required to evaluate the work (see the last sentences) as well as summarize the essay.

O’Brien, Kathleen. “Romanticism and Rhetoric: A Question of Audience.” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 30 (2000): 77-91. Print.

In her discussion of audience in the composition process, O’Brien explores the connections between literature and composition theory; she looks at Romantic poets Keats and Shelley and modern composition theorist Peter Elbow. O’Brien claims that the traditional Romantic focus on isolation (writing in solitude and as a means of self-expression, with little or no consideration of audience) offers a valid idea to modern teachers. O’Brien asserts that these poets’ views actually coincide with Elbow’s statement that, in the early stages of composition (invention or prewriting), students should avoid any thought of the audience, since students’ fear of opposing or critical readers may smother their own ideas. O’Brien brings her argument full circle by stating that it is in the later stages of the writing process (i.e., revision) that the student writer should consider audience. O’Brien is writing to college professors, especially to those who are writing instructors. I found this article both interesting and helpful because it showed me a vivid connection between literature and writing that I believe would help me to teach more effectively; it also helped me to understand and validate my own thought and writing process.

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