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Contributors: Dana Bisignani, Allen Brizee.

Summary:

This handout provides information about annotated bibliographies in MLA, APA, and CMS.

Annotated Bibliographies

Definitions

A **bibliography** is a list of sources (books, journals, Web sites, 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.

For more help, see our handout on [paraphrasing](#) sources.

- **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 this source biased or objective? What is the goal of this source?

For more help, see our handouts on [evaluating resources](#).

- **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 with formatting, see our [MLA handout](#). For APA, go here: [APA handout](#).

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.

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Annotated Bibliography Example

Elizabeth Thompson

Professor Stacks

English 102

20 August 2001

Stem Cell Research: An Annotated Bibliography

Holland, Suzanne. *The Human Embryonic Stem Cell Debate: Science, Ethics, and Public Policy*. Boston: MIT Press, 2001. Print.

This is the annotation of the above source, which is formatted according to MLA 2009 (7th ed.) guidelines for the bibliographic information listed above. If one were really writing an annotation for this source, one would offer a brief summary of what this book says about stem cell research.

After a brief summary, it would be appropriate to assess this source and offer some criticisms of it. Does it seem like a reliable and current source? Why? Is the research biased or objective? Are the facts well documented? Who is the author? Is she qualified in this subject? Is this source scholarly, popular, some of both?

The length of your annotation will depend on the assignment or on the purpose of your annotated bibliography. After summarizing and assessing, you can now reflect on this source. How does it fit into your research? Is this a helpful resource? Too scholarly? Not scholarly enough? Too general/specific? Since "stem cell research" is a very broad topic, has this source helped you to narrow your topic?

Senior, K. "Extending the Ethical Boundaries of Stem Cell Research." *Trends in Molecular Medicine* 7 (2001): 5-6. Print.

Not all annotations have to be the same length. For example, this source is a very short scholarly article. It may only take a sentence or two to summarize. Even if you are using a book, you should only focus on the sections that relate to your topic.

Not all annotated bibliographies assess and reflect; some merely summarize. That may not be the most helpful for you, but, if this is an assignment, you should always ask your instructor for specific guidelines.

Wallace, Kelly. "Bush Stands Pat on Stem Cell Policy." *CNN*. 13 August 2001. 17 August 2001. Television.

Using a variety of sources can help give you a broader picture of what is being said about your topic. You may want to investigate how scholarly sources are treating this topic differently than more popular sources. But again, if your assignment is to only use scholarly sources, then you will probably want to avoid magazines and popular web sites.

The bibliographic information above is proper MLA format (use whatever style is appropriate in your field) and the annotations are in paragraph form. Note also that the entries are alphabetized by the first word in the bibliographic entry. If you are writing an

annotated bibliography with many sources, it may be helpful to divide the sources into categories. For example, if putting together an extensive annotated bibliography for stem cell research, it might be best to divide the sources into categories such as ethical concerns, scholarly analyses, and political ramifications.

For more examples, a quick search at a library or even on the Internet should produce several examples of annotated bibliographies in your area.

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Annotated Bibliography Samples

Overview

For a sample of an entry from an annotated bibliography entry in PDF, click on the downloadable file in the media box above.

Below you will find sample annotations from annotated bibliographies, each with a different research project. Remember that the annotations you include in your own bibliography should reflect your research project and/or the guidelines of your assignment.

As mentioned elsewhere in this resource, depending on the purpose of your bibliography, some annotations may summarize, some may assess or evaluate a source, and some may reflect on the source's possible uses for the project at hand. Some annotations may address all three of these steps. Consider the purpose of your annotated bibliography and/or your instructor's directions when deciding how much information to include in your annotations.

Please keep in mind that all your text, including the write-up beneath the citation, must be indented so that the author's last name is the only text that is flush left.

Sample MLA Annotation

Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. Print.

Lamott's book offers honest advice on the nature of a writing life, complete with its insecurities and failures. Taking a humorous approach to the realities of being a writer, 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.

Chapters in this text could easily be included in the curriculum for a writing class. Several of the chapters in Part 1 address the writing process and would serve to generate discussion on students' own drafting and revising processes. Some of the writing exercises would also be appropriate for generating classroom writing exercises. Students should find Lamott's style both engaging and enjoyable.

In the sample annotation above, the writer includes three paragraphs: a summary, an evaluation of the text, and a reflection on its applicability to his/her own research, respectively.

For information on formatting MLA citations, see our [MLA 2009 Formatting and Style Guide](#).

Sample APA Annotation

Ehrenreich, B. (2001). *Nickel and dimed: On (not) getting by in America*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

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.

The annotation above both summarizes and assesses the book in the citation. The first paragraph provides a brief summary of the author's project in the book, covering the main points of the work. The second paragraph points out the project's strengths and evaluates its methods and presentation. This particular annotation does not reflect on the source's potential importance or usefulness for this person's own research.

For information on formatting APA citations, see our [APA Formatting and Style Guide](#).

Sample Chicago Manual Style Annotation

Davidson, Hilda Ellis. *Roles of the Northern Goddess*. London: Routledge, 1998.

Davidson's book provides a thorough examination of the major roles filled by the numerous pagan goddesses of Northern Europe in everyday life, including their roles in hunting, agriculture, domestic arts like weaving, the household,

and death. The author discusses relevant archaeological evidence, patterns of symbol and ritual, and previous research. The book includes a number of black and white photographs of relevant artifacts.

This annotation includes only one paragraph, a summary of the book. It provides a concise description of the project and the book's project and its major features.

Our CMS Formatting and Style Guide is forthcoming. For information on formatting Chicago Style citations, [click here](#).
