

Writing an Annotated Bibliography

What is an annotated bibliography?

An annotated bibliography is a list of sources on a given topic that offers a summary and, often, an evaluation of those sources. In other words, annotated bibliographies not only show us how to locate a source; they also show us the author's main points and reveal whether the source can be useful in the study of a particular subject. Annotations may vary in length from a sentence synopsis to multi-sentence analysis of a source's content. Annotated bibliographies function to provide researchers with enough information about a source to determine whether such sources merit closer attention.

What does an annotated bibliography do, exactly?

Annotated bibliographies may be purely descriptive, giving the gist of a source. Or, they may be evaluative. Or they may be a combination, both descriptive and evaluative. Consider these examples:

Descriptive (MLA):

Evans, Mary. *Introducing Contemporary Feminist Thought*. Polity, 1997.

The author writes about the American black culture. Her focus is on blacks in the academy and on the courses that they teach. Black feminism is seen as an act of identification, or a desire for a place called home. Evans states that the purpose of her book is to suggest some of the main ways in which a feminist understanding of the world can disrupt conventional assumptions.

Evaluative (APA):

Sulloway, F. (1996). *Born to rebel: Birth order, family dynamics, and creative lives*. Pantheon.

Sulloway is powerful when delving into the psychology of the birth order and is successful at incorporating many Darwinist philosophies while doing so. He shows the reader that the essence of birth order and sibling rivalry is truly how each child expresses their desire to achieve parental approval and attention. It incorporates his own analysis that the primary engine of history is located within families, not between them.

Descriptive/Evaluative (APA):

Forer, L. (1969). *Birth order and life roles*. Thomas Publishing.

This book covers the long term development of individuals in families of various sizes. The author is specific in her suggestions for how to optimally utilize this information to better ones marital, social, parental and working relationships. I was pleased after choosing this book as it

gave a slightly different perspective from some of my other resources. This book was published in 1969 and gives a bit of insight into how the lives of children were viewed then, in contrast to the present day.

Can Annotated Bibliographies have more than one paragraph?

Yes. In fact, it is quite common for individual annotations to have 2 paragraphs. The most common one of these is the annotation that contains a summary paragraph followed by an evaluate paragraph. Here is an example that utilizes an MLA style citation.

Multi-Paragraph (MLA):

Beattie, Valerie. "The Mystery at Thornfield: Representations of Madness in *Jane Eyre*." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 28, no. 4, 1996, pp. 493-506.

Valerie Beattie evaluates the relevance of many feminist interpretations of Bertha and Jane Eyre in this essay. Most feminist critics view the two characters as ideals for submissiveness and oppression. They feel that this makes these characters weaker in terms of personal strength. Beattie disagrees and discusses how Bertha is a powerful force in the novel. "The madwoman in the attic" spends more time being discussed outside of her prison, than she is actually seen confined in her cell. Bertha's strength is seen in the ultimate destruction of Thornfield.

Beattie's essay is complicated and often difficult to follow. Her presentation of madness as semiotic is vague and confusing. However, her arguments regarding Bertha as a strong presence in the novel are relevant for discussion. The essay implies that many feminist critics think Bertha and Jane are weak characters, an issue which is not entirely accurate. Overall, the essay is not particularly useful. It has a few good ideas, but it is too confusing to be taken completely seriously.

When are these assigned?

Annotated bibliographies are commonly assigned as a stage of a research assignment. However, at Bristol, you might encounter one of these as the final project in a criminal justice, sociology, or history class among others.