

# Writing an Annotated Bibliography

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An **annotated bibliography** is similar to a bibliography with some important differences: in an annotated bibliography, the bibliographic information is followed by a brief description of the content, quality, and usefulness of the source. An annotated bibliography can assist you in every facet of your dissertation and research. Knowing which sources have information about particular aspects of your study reduces unnecessary reading and searching (and *re*-searching) material. When you decide to write an annotation for a source, you will likely read the source more carefully.

An annotated bibliography is usually written in full paragraphs, using APA 6th formatting, rather than as a series of bullet points. However you might want to use bullet points, or a mindmap (see Simon, 2011) to put together an outline of what will be included in each paragraph. If you are creating an annotated bibliography for a course, make certain that you use the format required. However, if another format is more appealing and helpful, you could create a separate annotated bibliography for your personal purposes.

## Selecting the sources

The quality and usefulness of your annotated bibliography depends on your selection of sources. To put together an annotated bibliography that could help develop your own study, make sure you have defined the scope of your research carefully so you can determine what to include and exclude. Your research should attempt to be comprehensive within well-defined boundaries. Consider these questions to help you find appropriate limits for your research:

1. What problem am I investigating?
2. What methodology will likely guide my study?
3. What question(s) am I trying to pursue?
4. What kind of material am I looking for? (academic books and journal articles? government reports or policy statements? articles from the popular press? primary historical sources?)
5. How can I find essential studies related to the problem and topic I will investigate? [Hint: Finding citations in useful articles enables you to reveal what sources are used by other authors and why. Keep an eye out for studies referred to by several of the sources you review],
6. What data bases are used in my field of study?

Please keep in mind that an annotated bibliography is **not** a literature review. A review of the literature is much more complex and requires seeking other opinions (references) for collaboration, clarification, and contention.

*Now back to creating an annotated bibliography.*

### **Summarizing the argument of a source**

An annotation briefly restates the main argument of a source. An annotation of an academic source, for example, usually identifies the thesis (or research question, or hypothesis), the major methods of investigation, and the main conclusions. Keep in mind that identifying the argument of a source is a different task than describing or listing its contents. Rather than just listing contents (see Example 1 below), an annotation should account for why the contents are there (see Example 2 below).

**Example 1:** Only lists contents: *This is not acceptable (the writing is also not scholarly).*

Mclvor, S. D. (1995). Aboriginal women's rights as *existing rights*:  
Canadian Women Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme 2/3, 34-38.

This article discusses recent constitutional legislation as it affects the human rights of aboriginal women in Canada: the *Constitution Act* (1982), its amendment in 1983, and amendments to the *Indian Act* (1985). It also discusses the implications for aboriginal women of the Supreme Court of Canada's interpretation of the Constitution Act in *R. v. Sparrow* (1991).

**Example 2:** Identifies the argument: *This is a more acceptable and scholarly discussion.*

Mclvor, S. D. (1995). Aboriginal women's rights as *existing rights*:

Canadian Women Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme 2/3, 34-38.

Mclvor (1995) sought to determine the extent and effect of the civil and political rights returned to aboriginal women under: the *Constitution Act* (1982), which reversed prior laws that denied Indian status to aboriginal women who married non-aboriginal men.\* Mclvor used a grounded theory, situational analysis approach to determine how the Act recognized fundamental human rights and existing aboriginal rights, granting to aboriginal women full participation in the aboriginal right to self-government.\*\* Mclvor presented parallel arguments in determining fishing rights in the Supreme Court of Canada's decision in the *R. v. Sparrow* (1991).

\* research question and intent

\*\* method & main conclusions

The following reading strategies can help you identify the argument of your source

1. Identify the author's thesis (central claim or purpose) or research question. Both the introduction and the conclusion can help you with this task.
2. Look for repetition of key terms or ideas. Follow them throughout the text and see how the author deals with them. Note especially the key terms that occur in the thesis or research question that governs the text.
3. Notice how the text is laid out and organized. Review the main divisions or sections.

4. Determine what is emphasized and why. Accounting for why will help you to move beyond listing contents and toward giving an account of the argument.
5. Notice whether and how a theory is used to interpret evidence or data.
6. Identify the method used to investigate the problem(s) addressed in the text.
7. Pay attention to the opening sentence(s) of each paragraph. This is where authors often state concisely their main point in the paragraph.
8. Look for paragraphs that summarize the argument. A section may sometimes begin or conclude with such a paragraph.

### **Assessing the relevance and value of sources**

Your annotation should go on to *briefly* assess the value of the source to the investigation of your research question or problem, by addressing the following questions:

1. Are you interested in the way the author frames the research question or in the way he or she goes about answering the research question (the method)? Why or Why not?
2. How does the author make new connections or open up new ways of seeing a problem? (e.g. bringing the Sparrow decision concerning aboriginal fishing rights to bear on the scope of women's rights)
3. Are you interested in the way the source uses a theoretical framework or a key concept? (e.g. analysis of existing, extinguished, and other kinds of rights) Why or Why not?
4. How does the source gather and analyze a particular body of evidence that could be helpful to your study? (e.g. the historical development of a body of legislation)
5. How do the conclusions relate to your own investigation?

In order to determine how you will use the source, or define its contribution, you need to assess the quality of the argument while keeping in mind the context of your project or study.

1. Why is the authors' contention(s) of value, or inconsequential?

2. What are the limitations of the study or positions?
3. How well defined is the research problem?
4. How effective is the method of investigation?
5. How solid is the evidence?
6. How credible are the methods?
7. How compelling is the empirical evidence, if any?
8. Would you draw the same conclusions from the evidence? Why or why not?
9. What models are available in course materials or professional organizations for assessing the arguments made?
10. How does the study compare to other studies?
11. How does the study compare to your own understanding of the issues?

Sample:

Collinson, V. (2001). Intellectual, social, and moral development: *Why technology cannot replace teachers*. High School Journal, 85, 1-10.

Collinson (2001) focused on the failure of computers to resolve social and emotional problems, and the need for classroom teachers in the development of students' intellectual, social, and moral education. This qualitative case study analyzed how students make information meaningful through inquiry, collaboration, and team structures, based on personal face-to-face interactions. The findings stressed the need to teach students how to use and control the information gathered through online searches in a productive way. Recommendations involved having schools develop social skills programs to help teachers evaluate, analyze, and critically help students regarding computer related activities. The study did not provide helpful suggestions on how these programs could be implemented, evaluated, and assessed. The arguments presented could have been strengthened through a discussion of deviant behaviors such as: students using electronic devices to cheat, student hacking, and using the computer to bully other students. In addition, counter-arguments regarding the successes of virtual classrooms were not addressed.

## Some language to use when referring to published studies

It is sometimes challenging to find the vocabulary needed to summarize and discuss a source. Here is a list of some verbs for referring to references and ideas that you might find useful. Remember: we refer to published studies in the past tense.

accounted for	clarified	described	exemplified	indicated	questioned
analyzed	compared	depicted	exhibited	investigated	recognized
argued	concluded	determined	explained	judged	reflected
assessed	criticized	distinguished	framed	justified	referred to
asserted	defended	evaluated	identified	posited	reported
assumed	defined	emphasized	illustrated	persuaded	reviewed
claimed	demonstrated	examined	implied	proposed	suggested

The evidence suggests that . . .

Smith (2006) assessed the effect of . . .

Jones (2007) questioned the view that . . .

Regardless of your study or assignment, your annotations should summarize what has been done, assess the value of the study, and include your reflection on the meaning of the study in relation to your own research and knowledge.

## References

Simon (2011), *Dissertation and Scholarly Research: Recipes for Success*. Seattle, WA: Dissertation Success, LLC