The Annotated Bibliography: An Alternative Research Assignment
by Susan Blake

Inquiry, research, critical reading, and thoughtful, concise writing are fundamental elements of the academic work we expect and require of our students. The traditional research paper is probably the most time-honored vehicle by which students learn, practice, and finally demonstrate the acquisition of these important skills. The annotated bibliography may be one component in the development of such a paper, but it can also serve as a flexible, stand-alone alternative to support the aims of your course.

The Critical (Evaluative) Bibliography

While a purely descriptive bibliography may be appropriate for beginning students or as a tool for the researcher to generate a working list of potential sources, the critical or evaluative bibliography addresses not only the content of the source, but its quality and usefulness.

Creating such a bibliography is an effective means for acquiring and practicing the ability to:

- Formulate a clear, effective research question given the scope of the project
- Retrieve relevant source materials using the library catalog, electronic databases, and advanced features of web search engines
- Evaluate sources for relevancy, currency, author credentials, and coverage
- Identify main points, supporting evidence, point of view, bias, and tone
- Summarize accurately and briefly explain the usefulness (of lack thereof) of each source in addressing the researcher’s question

The bibliography assignment works nicely when given soon after a class’s library research instruction visit, and the source evaluation handout (attached here) provides an excellent template for the construction of the annotations.

Number of Entries

This, of course, will depend on the scope and depth of the research project. Is the student’s research question, “How might nutritional supplements contribute to a wellness regimen?” or “Should I take echinacea to prevent colds?” Is the question “Should capital punishment be outlawed?” or “What are the effects of lethal injection?” Is the course lower or upper division? Generally, though, in an introductory composition class, I ask for seven or eight viable entries. In a capstone I would increase that to 12-15. I also require that at least one of the entries be a source which the student would not use in a paper/project, with the reasons for rejecting it.
Elements of the Annotation

While the assignment for a beginning researcher may ask for only a brief summary and a comment or two on matters of currency and relevance, more advanced students might be required to evaluate sources in light of previous research findings, to make note of an author’s other contributions to the field, and to engage with the argument presented in the source.

Should the annotation describe the format or organization of the source? Include whether charts, graphs, or appendices are used? Discuss the source’s readability and intended audience? Comment on the author’s reputation?

Style of the Annotation

In addition to variations in content of the annotation, students will need to know our preferences for organization and style. For instance, should the elements of the annotation be listed in a specific order? Should the annotation be one paragraph or divided into separate sections for description and evaluation? Is there a minimum or maximum length for an annotation?

Some annotated bibliographies use phrases rather than full sentences to describe their sources: “Includes illustrations. Useful information but generally superficial coverage. Recommended for overview of subject.” The choice is yours, of course, but I require the complete-sentence, paragraph-structure annotation style.

Instructions, Templates, and Models

The basics of bibliographic annotation are pretty universal, but variations abound – as do “how-to” web sites (yes, even Wikipedia has an entry for them; imagine that). Depending on the class and the assignment objectives, you can send students to a ready-made set of instructions. The best ones include rationales, step-by-step instructions, and model annotations. They also provide examples of bibliographic entries formatted for MLA, APA, and Chicago. They generously grant permission for academic use. Reinventing the wheel is optional.

Here are some particularly good ones:

- [library.ucsc.edu](http://library.ucsc.edu/help/howto/write-an-annotated-bibliography)
- [olinuris.library.cornell.edu](http://olinuris.library.cornell.edu/ref/research/skill28.htm)
- [owl.howl.purdue.edu](http://owl.howl.purdue.edu/owl/resource/614/1/)
- [bedfordstmartins.com](http://bedfordstmartins.com/writersref6e/lmcontent/ch07/PDF/Hacker-Orlov-MLA-Biblio.pdf)
- [www.library.mun.ca](http://www.library.mun.ca/guides/howto/annotated_bibl.php)
- [writingcenter.unc.edu](http://writingcenter.unc.edu/resources/handouts-demos/specific-writing-assignments/annotated-bibliographies)

Research without the research paper? This could be just the thing for your class!