

A Guide To Writing an Annotated Bibliography

What is an Annotated Bibliography?

An annotated bibliography gives an account of the research that has been done on a given topic. Like any bibliography, an annotated bibliography is an alphabetical list of research sources. In addition to bibliographic data, an annotated bibliography provides a concise summary of each source and some assessment of its value or relevance. Depending on your assignment, an annotated bibliography may be one stage in a larger research project, or it may be an independent project standing on its own.

Selecting the Sources:

The quality and usefulness of your bibliography will depend on your selection of sources. Define the scope of your research carefully so that you can make good judgments about what to include and exclude. Your research should attempt to be reasonably comprehensive within well-defined boundaries. Consider these questions to help you find appropriate limits for your research:

- What **problem** am I investigating? What **question(s)** am I trying to pursue? If your bibliography is part of a research project, this project will probably be governed by a research question. If your bibliography is an independent project on a general topic (e.g., aboriginal women and Canadian law), try formulating your topic as a question or a series of questions in order to define your search more precisely (e.g., How has Canadian law affecting aboriginal women changed as a result of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms? How have these changes affected aboriginal women? How have aboriginal women influenced and responded to these legal developments?).
- 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? etc.)
- Am I finding **essential studies** on my topic? (Read footnotes in useful articles carefully to see what sources they use and why. Keep an eye out for studies that are referred to by several of your sources.)

Summarizing the Argument of a Source:

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

Ex. 1

Only lists contents

**McIvor, S. D. (1995). Aboriginal women's rights as "existing rights."
Canadian Woman 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).

Ex. 2

Identifies the argument

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

This article seeks to define the extent of the civil and political rights returned to aboriginal women in the *Constitution Act* (1982), in its amendment in 1983, and in amendments to the *Indian Act* (1985). This legislation reverses prior laws that denied Indian status to aboriginal women who married non-aboriginal men. On the basis of the Supreme Court of Canada's interpretation of the *Constitution Act* in *R. v. Sparrow* (1991), McIvor argues that the *Act* recognizes fundamental human rights and existing aboriginal rights, granting to aboriginal women full participation in the aboriginal right to self-government.

research question

method & main conclusions

The following reading strategies can help you to identify the argument of a source:

- Identify the author's thesis (central claim or purpose) or research question. Both the introduction **and** the conclusion can help you with this task.
- Look for repetition of key terms or ideas. Follow them through the text and see what the author does with them. Note especially the key terms that occur in the thesis or research question that governs the text.
- Notice how the text is laid out and organized. What are the main divisions or sections? What is emphasized? Why? Accounting for why will help you to move beyond listing contents and toward giving an account of argument.
- Notice whether and how a theory is used to interpret evidence or data. Identify the method used to investigate the problem(s) addressed in the text.

- Pay attention to the opening sentence(s) of each paragraph, where authors often state concisely their main point in the paragraph.
- 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 now go on to briefly assess the value of the source to an investigation of your research question or problem. If your bibliography is part of a research project, briefly identify how you intend to use the source and why. If your bibliography is an independent project, try to assess the source's contribution to the research on your topic.

- Are you interested in the way the source frames its research question or in the way it goes about answering it (its method)? Does it 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)
- 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)
- Does the source gather and analyze a particular body of evidence that you want to use? (e.g., the historical development of a body of legislation)
- How do the source's conclusions bear on your own investigation?

In order to determine how you will use the source or define its contribution, you will need to assess the quality of the argument: why is it of value? what are its limitations? how well defined is its research problem? how effective is its method of investigation? how good is the evidence? would you draw the same conclusions from the evidence?

Keep the context of your project in mind. How is material assessed in your course or discipline? What models for assessing arguments are available in course materials?

Various Kinds of Annotated Bibliographies:

Annotated bibliographies do come in many variations. Pay close attention to the requirements of your assignment. Here are some possible variations:

- Some assignments may require you to summarize only and not to evaluate.
- Some assignments may want you to notice and comment on patterns of similarity and dissimilarity between sources; other assignments may want you to treat each source independently.
- If the bibliography is long, consider organizing it in sections. Your categories of organization should help clarify your research question.
- Some assignments may require or allow you to preface the bibliography (or its sections) with a paragraph explaining the scope of your investigation and providing a rationale for your selection of sources.

Some Language for Talking about Texts and Arguments:

It is sometimes challenging to find vocabulary in which to summarize and discuss a text. Here is a list of some verbs for referring to texts and ideas that you might find useful:

account for	clarify	describe	exemplify	indicate	question
analyze	compare	depict	exhibit	investigate	recognize
argue	conclude	determine	explain	judge	reflect
assess	contrast	distinguish	frame	justify	refer to
assert	criticize	evaluate	identify	narrate	report
assume	defend	emphasize	illustrate	persuade	review
claim	define	examine	imply	propose	suggest
	demonstrate				

The evidence indicates that....

The article assesses the effect of....

The author identifies three reasons for

The article questions the view that....

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