Writing an Annotated Bibliography

An annotated bibliography is a compiled list of secondary sources (not primary nor tertiary sources) on a topic, focused on debated issues or research problems. **Bibliography** refers to the formal citation in the list of bibliography entries. **Annotation** refers to the one-paragraph summary plus critical evaluation of the secondary source. **Secondary sources** refers to the critical literature on a topic: scholarly sources analyzing and commenting on primary sources, written by and for researchers, and published in peer-reviewed books, journal articles, and specialized encyclopedias. One reads secondary sources to learn from researchers and to enter the on-going scholarly conversation (see *A Manual for Writers* §3.1.2).

Research writers go deep and wide with three aims: compile insights, catalogue diverse perspectives on the topic, and write a **literature review** by which they can situate their thesis among the other viewpoints in the scholarly conversation. One writes the annotated bibliography for an academic audience: the research community including oneself and others investigating the topic. So one writes in a formal style that is clear, concise, and in third-person perspective. A writer designs the document with a title indicating the debated issue; order sources alphabetically by authors’ last names; use the relevant documentation style, such as CMS, MLA, or APA; and cite quotations using parenthetical citation of page numbers.

Writing an annotated bibliography is a three-step process: **research, documentation, and annotation**.

A. **Research recent, relevant, and reliable secondary sources on the topic.** (a) **Recent** means within twenty years in the humanities, but possibly older for landmark and seminal sources. (b) **Relevant** means useful sources addressing the same or similar topic or issue. (c) **Reliable** means quality sources that are accurate, thorough, and written by scholars or experts; have original analysis, research, and interpretation; and are peer-reviewed by scholars before being published. Researchers make extensive use of library books and databases to find quality sources, usually skimming introductions and using critical skills to select the best secondary sources on the topic.

B. **Document the secondary sources** using the required citation style of bibliography for preparing the list of works cited. The bibliography entry is formed with hanging paragraphs. The annotation is formed as a regular paragraph with the first line indented five spaces (see examples below).

C. **Write a four-part annotation** in brief format (about five sentences or 100 words), applying a concise style along with citing quotations in parentheses. The annotation has four parts in the following order:

1. **Writer’s name and credentials (and critical approach if appropriate.)** Begin each annotation by identifying the writer, his or her professional title or credentials, and critical approach if applicable. If the author is anonymous, then name the editor, institution, or the publication as the authority and perspective.

2. **Summary of thesis and relevant positions and evidence.** The summary states the work’s thesis, or argument, records positions on relevant issues, and recaps relevant reasons and evidence. Researchers summarize what is relevant to their topic, often quoting significant phrases or sentences for later use in writing.

3. **Evaluation of source’s quality.** The critical evaluation assesses the source’s quality with three questions. One should answer the three questions directly unless the answer is given or implied in the bibliography entry.
   - **What is the genre and purpose?** A book, journal article, specialized encyclopedia article, a review, an editorial summary, a report of scientific research? What is the purpose of the text?
   - **Who is the intended audience?** Consider whether the text is intended for a general, specialized, or academic audience, the publication outlet, and how fair or biased the source is.
   - **What is the media or outlet?** Name and evaluate the publisher’s reliability, especially for Internet sources, magazine and newspaper articles, and encyclopedia articles.

4. **Evaluation of source’s usefulness on the topic.** Conclude your annotation with one sentence stating precisely how the source helps one understand the topic. Does the source offer an insightful argument, a thorough summary of the scholarly conversation or debate, a fresh perspective or position on an issue, a review of the historical or critical contexts, some new evidence, a new application, or a thorough bibliography?
Conducting Research

Survey the topic in preliminary research. Researchers start by probing their topic, reading specialized encyclopedia articles and introductions to books and articles to find the major voices, the assumptions, and the problems in the field. To this end, literature reviews are especially helpful because they summarize prior research centered on problems. Researchers take note of where the debates, puzzles, or aporia lie in order to understand and categorize the problems and solutions. Researchers go deep in analysis and wide in the scholarly conversation to situate historical and contemporary perspectives. From the survey, researchers seek to develop a challenging research question and even a working thesis.

Develop a research question. A researcher needs an appropriate research question to make a research plan and focus the writing process. The question should be narrow (not too broad), challenging (not too factual or too bland, but interpretive and debatable), and grounded (not too speculative but able to be supported with evidence).

Make a research plan. A researcher is a project manager who maps out the plan with a calendar. Like the scientific method, a research plan consists of five parts: the refined research question, a working hypothesis, a research problem or debated involved issue in answering the question, some probable reasons and evidence needed to prove and support the hypothesis, and sources of information to find the evidence. The plan leads to the library and its online research databases. Researchers enjoy the detective work and keep an open yet discerning mind throughout the process.

Research with three aims in mind. Research writers keep three aims in mind—parts and stages of the writing process that are accomplished best in writing a bibliography or an annotated bibliography (see A Manual for Writers, chapters 5 and 10).

- Literature review: Researchers seek to understand the scholarly conversation in a way they can summarize in a literature review, a categorized summary of prior research on the problem, written in the introductory section.
- Counterarguments: Writers address rejoinders against opposing or differing viewpoints, being sure to represent others’ arguments accurately and fairly.
- Core argument: Writers develop a positive core argument with good reasons, rich insights, and accurate evidence by means of analyzing primary texts and secondary sources.

Find recent, relevant, and reliable sources. Research is only as valuable as the quality of sources consulted, so research writers want to be discerning and exacting when selecting their secondary sources.

- Recent: within five years in the social sciences, within twenty years for the humanities but possibly older sources depending on the topic and the quality of and availability of sources; landmark and seminal sources may be much older but used to provide background information and context.
- Relevant: related to and useful for the topic and target readers, where useful means credible and contributing to multiple points of view, but not biased toward one political or critical perspective; sources should relate and possibly respond to one another, giving a sense of the ongoing conversation.
- Reliable: major voices, careful researchers, and insightful analysts deemed credible by experts; published by respectable outlets and peer-reviewed journals; demonstrating high standards of research; showing accuracy and fairness in representing and responding to other perspectives.

Start with the library’s online databases. Researchers find the best available online research databases for their topic.

- Identity key words from the research question and problem; mix key words to limit searches in databases.
- Narrow Internet searches by domain to include only .edu or .gov sites (avoid .net, .org, and .com sites).
- Scan titles and sometimes content for recent, relevant, reliable results.
- Look at bibliographies of recent sources to discover more sources related to the topic.
- Read introductions of relevant sources for their literature reviews and thesis statements.
- Find twice as many sources as needed; then discard irrelevant sources.
- Type citation information of useful sources in a draft bibliography page.
- Save articles in electronic files on a flash or computer drive along with sufficient citation information.
- Type (do not cut and paste) citation information when writing the bibliography.
- Label parts of sources by their function: key term, thesis, evidence, pay off, def., lit. rev., view 1, view 2, etc.
- Do not copy abstracts supplied by database companies, for they are irrelevant to research essays and annotations.
A.Bib. Sample

How Rhetorical are Milton’s Epic Poems?


In a landmark study, Professor Broadbent of King’s College, Cambridge, makes a now-classic claim: Milton was “the last great practitioner of rhetoric” (224). As such, Milton created a new type of epic by means of rhetorical figures and structures. In a “pioneering demonstration” (Sloane), Broadbent effectively establishes his thesis by diagramming several hundred lines from Milton’s poems and analyzing them with classical rhetorical terms, indicating “how far Milton used rhetorical devises to decorate the blankness of his verse” (230). Broadbent theorizes that Milton “came to trust less and less in art” and more in rhetorical figures for his themes, dramatic structures, and sentence style; for instance, in Paradise Regain’d, Milton applies rhetoric “to expound theology, to distinguish characters, and to choose sides” (234). Broadbent provides ample examples and detailed comments on how Milton applied rhetoric to his theological poetry.


Ryan J. Stark, Professor of English at Penn State, argues that Milton portrays two types of rhetorical “frigidity” in Paradise Lost: demonic and scientific “cold styles,” spoken respectively by the devils in the hellish city of Pandemonium and by Adam in his attempt to quantify the cosmos. Stark’s thesis shows Milton’s critique of the new science: “[A]ttr个人eous grandeur always produces a chill, because it has at its core a kind of cold-heartedness” (26). Milton’s cold style signifies fallen and disinterested attitudes toward God’s creation that produce cold speech. Notably, frigidity derives from Aristotle’s Rhetoric 3.3 and Longinus’s concept of psychrotita (21). Stark applies his rhetorical training to Milton’s poetics of pathos in a fascinating analysis of style. Stark’s essay, including detailed endnotes and full bibliography, has direct and helpful implications for reading Milton’s epic poems through a lens of rhetorical criticism.


Kathleen M. Swaim, Professor of English at Emory University, compares and contrasts Raphael’s narration in Books 5–8 of Paradise Lost and Michael’s narration in Books 11–12. Swaim’s thesis is that these blocks of text “fulfill the epic’s generic responsibility to include (all) the learning of the culture it represents” (ix). Swaim shows that the two angelic doctors of divinity present educational discourses reflecting the epistemic dichotomy of prelapsarian and postlapsarian worlds due to the different educational needs of Adam and Eve as innocent and later fallen pupils. Their curriculums are classical and Christian: Raphael’s instruction is humanistic “improvement,” and Michael’s reeducation is Christian “amendment” (27). Swaim supports her thesis in five chapters, one called “Lapsarian Logic” that helpfully summarizes and applies Milton’s Ramist-style logic. Swain’s thorough research includes thirty-two pages of endnotes, a twelve-page bibliography, and a helpful index. She makes many insights regarding how rhetoric shapes the didactic aims in the English Reformed epics.