

Writing and Communication Center

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Creating Entries for an Annotated Bibliography

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Annotations: A Definition

The style, content and even the name given to annotations are highly variable, depending on academic discipline, purpose and personal preferences of those assigning and creating them. These guidelines are general, so considering your particular context is crucial in how you create your annotations.

In general, an **annotation** summarizes the essential ideas contained in a document, reporting the author's thesis and main points as well as how they relate to your own ideas or thesis. An **evaluative annotation** adds your judgments about the quality of the author's ideas.

What do we mean by "essential ideas?" Essential ideas include the author's **thesis** (also known as his/her conclusion, stance, position, main point, central idea) and the ideas used to **support** the thesis (known as reasons, argument, sub-points, supporting ideas).

Annotated Bibliographies¹

In some instances, the **annotated bibliography** focuses on how particular works address a research question or problem you are pursuing. The annotated bibliography may be considered the outcome of the source evaluation process, allowing you to determine not only the credibility, but the relevance of articles, books, and other resources to your research paper or project. As the relevance of sources changes during your research, so will the sources listed on your bibliography. In MLA documentation format, sources are listed alphabetically, with annotations immediately following each entry.

Summative Annotations

Some instructors prefer that you write **summative annotations**, which provide only a summary of an author's essential ideas. Summative annotations are typically two to three sentences long and include no statements of the source's relevance to your paper or remarks evaluating the source's quality.

Essay in an Anthology

Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*." *Heart of Darkness*. Ed. Robert Kimbrough. New York: Norton, 1988. 251-62. An essay by the influential Nigerian author Achebe on the prevalent image of Africa in the Western imagination, focusing on the racist dimensions of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Achebe presents an interpretation of the function of the images of Others in the construction of cultural identity and identifies a pervasive need on the part of "the West" to denigrate and dehumanize Africa.

Book

Johnstone, Frederick A. *Class, Race, and Gold: A Study of Class Relations and Racial Discrimination in South Africa*. London: Routledge, 1976. Johnstone examines the labor experience of nonwhites in South African gold mines, arguing that the structure of the labor system comes from the industrial capitalism of the mines. Johnstone portrays the low-wage blacks as pawns of the bourgeois mine owners. Contains a bibliography and many tables and statistics on black wage-earners and mine owners.

Journal Article

Schaie, K.W. "Ageist Language in Psychological Research." *American Psychologist* 48 (1993): 49-51. An article on avoiding ageist bias in research, including discussion on objective research design and on how to report what the research actually demonstrates without adding value-laden assumptions.

¹ Examples follow MLA format. For other documentation formats (e.g., Chicago and APA), please consult a writing consultant, a handbook, or a librarian.

Evaluative Annotations

Evaluative annotations summarize the essential ideas in a document and provide judgments—negative, positive, or both—about their quality. Evaluative annotations typically are three to four sentences long. Note the differences between the following evaluative annotations, with judgments added to the summary of essential ideas, to the previous summative annotations.

Essay in an Anthology

Achebe, Chinua. “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.” *Heart of Darkness*. Ed. Robert Kimbrough. New York: Norton, 1988. 251-62. A provocative essay by the influential Nigerian author Achebe on the prevalent image of Africa in the Western imagination, focusing on the racist dimensions of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Achebe presents an interpretation of the function of the images of Others in the construction of cultural identity and identifies a pervasive need on the part of “the West” to denigrate and dehumanize Africa. This controversial essay has been tremendously influential in recent discussion of multicultural education but has received by no means universal assent.

Book

Johnstone, Frederick A. *Class, Race, and Gold: A Study of Class Relations and Racial Discrimination in South Africa*. London: Routledge, 1976. Johnstone effectively examines the labor experience of nonwhites in South African gold mines from a sociological perspective, arguing that the structure of the labor system comes from the industrial capitalism of the mines. Johnstone very convincingly uses a Marxist analysis to portray the low-wage blacks as pawns of the bourgeois mine owners. Contains a good bibliography and many informative tables and statistics of black wage-earners and mine owners.

Journal Article

Schaie, K.W. “Ageist Language in Psychological Research.” *American Psychologist* 48 (1993): 49-51. An article on avoiding ageist bias in research, discussing objective research design and how to report what the research actually demonstrates without adding value-laden assumptions. Schaie’s general emphasis on how to avoid ageist bias does not offer any specific examples of ageism in research, but Schaie’s approach to ageist bias provides an alternative perspective to my own viewpoint.

Consider This

When writing evaluative annotations, try to keep the following in mind:

- State the author’s thesis and supporting points
- Make a judgment about the quality of the author’s ideas
- Explain why the author’s ideas are valuable or not

What Are Annotated Bibliographies for?

Annotated bibliographies have four main purposes. During the research and writing process, they help you, the researcher, keep track of the changing relevance of sources as you develop your ideas. They also help you save time by focusing on each author's essential ideas. Second, annotated bibliographies help your instructor make sure you are consulting seminal works on your topic. During the research process, they also help your librarian guide you toward the best available sources, and finally, they help your writing consultant work with you more efficiently on integrating an author's ideas into your writing.

Annotations Exercise

For practice, re-read the evaluative annotation for Chinua Achebe and identify the sentence or phrase which states each of the following:

1. Author's thesis
2. Author's supporting points
3. Student's judgment on the quality of the author's ideas

See answers below.

Key to Annotations Exercise

1. Author's thesis (first sentence)
2. Author's supporting points (second sentence)
3. Student's judgment about the quality of the author's ideas (third and final sentence, as well as words such as "provocative" and "influential")

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