Chapter Six
The Annotated Bibliography Exercise

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What is an Annotated Bibliography?

As you develop a working thesis for your research project and begin to collect different pieces of evidence, you will soon find yourself needing some sort of system for keeping track of everything. The system discussed in this chapter is an **annotated bibliography,** which is a list of sources on a particular topic that includes a brief summary of what each source is about. This writing exercise is a bit different from the others in this part of *The Process of Research Writing* in that isn't an "essay" per se; rather it is an ongoing writing project that you will be "building" as you discover new pieces of evidence for your research project.

Here is an example of an entry from an annotated bibliography in MLA style:

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Parsons, Matt. "Protecting Children on the Electronic

     Frontier:  A Law Enforcement Challenge." FBI Law

     Enforcement Bulletin 69.10 (2000): 22-26.
```

This article is about an educational program used by the U.S. Navy to educate people in the Navy and their families about some of the things that are potentially dangerous to children about the Internet. Parsons says that the educational program has been effective.

Annotated bibliography entries have two parts. The top of the entry is the **citation**. It is the part that starts "Parsons, Matt'" and that lists information like the name of the writer, where the evidence appeared, the date of publication, and other publishing information.

☛ **Hyperlink:** For guidelines on how to properly write citations for your Annotated bibliographies, see Chapter 12, "Citing Your Research Using MLA or APA Style."

The second part of the entry is the **summary** of the evidence being cited. A good annotated bibliography summary provides enough information in a sentence or two to help you and others understand what the research is about in a neutral and non-opinionated way.

The first two sentences of this annotation are an example of this sort of very brief, "just the facts" sort of summary. In the brief summaries of entries in an annotated bibliography, stay away from making evaluations about the source— "I didn't like this article very much" or "I thought this article was great." The most important goal of your brief summary is to help you, colleagues, and other potential readers get an idea about the subject of the particular piece of evidence.

Summaries can be challenging to write, especially when you are trying to write them about longer and more complicated sources of research. Keep these guidelines in mind as you write your own summaries.

- **Keep your summary short.** Good summaries for annotated bibliographies are not "complete" summaries; rather, they provide the highlights of the evidence in as brief and concise a manner as possible, no more than a sentence or two.

- **Don't quote from what you are summarizing.** Summaries will be more useful to you and your colleagues if you write them in your own words. Instead of quoting directly what you think is the point of the piece of evidence, try to paraphrase it. (For more information on paraphrasing your evidence, see Chapter 3, "Quoting, Paraphrasing, and Avoiding Plagiarism").

- **Don't "cut and paste" from database abstracts.** Many of the periodical indexes that are available as part of your library's computer system include abstracts of articles. Do no "cut" this abstract material and then "paste" it into your own annotated bibliography. For one thing, this is plagiarism. Second, "cutting and pasting" from the abstract defeats one of the purposes of writing summaries and creating an annotated bibliography in the first place, which is to help you understand and explain your research.

Different writers will inevitably write slightly different summaries of the same evidence. Some differences between different writers' summaries of the same piece of evidence result from different interpretations of what it important in the research; there's nothing wrong with that.

However, two summaries from different writers should both provide a similar summary. In other words, its not acceptable when the difference of interpretation is the result of a lack of understanding of the evidence.

Why Write Annotated Bibliographies?

An annotated bibliography is an excellent way to keep track of the research you gather for your project. Make no mistake about it— **it is extremely important that you keep track of all of your evidence for your research project, and that you keep track of it from the beginning of the process of research writing.**

There's nothing more frustrating than finding an excellent article or book chapter you are excited about incorporating into your research project, only to realize you have forgotten where you found the article or book chapter in the first place. This is extremely frustrating, and it's easily avoided by doing something like writing an annotated bibliography.

You could use other methods for keeping track of your research. For example, you could use note cards and write down the source information as a proper citation, then write down the information about the source that is important. If the material you know you want to use from a certain source is short enough, you might even write a direct quote, which is where you write down word for word what the source says exactly as it is written. At other times, you can write a paraphrase, which is where you write down what the source means using your own words.

While note cards and other methods have their advantages, annotated bibliographies are an extremely useful tool for keeping track of your research. An annotated bibliography:

- Centralizes your research into one document that you can keep track of both as a print-out of a word-processed file and as a file you save electronically.

- Allows you to "copy and paste" citation information into the works cited part of your research project.

An annotated bibliography also gives you the space to start writing and thinking a bit about how some of your research might fit into your project. Consider these two sample entries from an annotated bibliography from a research project on pharmaceutical advertising:

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Siegel, Marc.  "Fighting the Drug (ad) Wars." The Nation 17

     June 2002:  21.

Siegel, who is a doctor himself, writes about how drug
advertising has undermined the communication between
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doctors and patients. He says that drug ads have driven up
the costs of prescription drugs, particularly big selling
drugs like those for cholesterol.

Wechsler, Jill. "Minority Docs See DTC Ads as Way to

Address 'Race Gap.'" <u>Pharmaceutical Executive</u>

May 2002: 32, 34. <u>WilsonSelect Database</u>. Eastern

Michigan University Halle Library. 20 October

2002. <http://www.emich.edu/halle>.

This article is about a study that said that African-
American doctors saw advertising of prescription drugs as a
way of educating their patients. The ads are useful
because they talk about diseases that affect African-
Americans.

Even from the limited amount of information available in these entries, it's clear
that a relationship between these articles exists. Both are similar articles about
how the doctor/patient relationship is affected by drug advertising. But both are
also different. The first article is from the newspaper *The Nation,* which is in
many ways similar to an academic journal and which is also known for its liberal
views. The second article is from a trade journal (also similar to academic
journals in many ways) that obviously is an advocate for the pharmaceutical
industry.

In other words, in the process of compiling an annotated bibliography, you are
doing more than keeping track of your research. You are starting to make some
comparisons and beginning to see some relationships between your evidence, a
process that will become increasingly important as you gather more research and
work your way through the different exercises that lead to the research project.

But remember: However you decide to keep track of your research as you
progress through your project—annotated bibliography, note cards, or another
method—**the important thing is that you need to keep track of your research as
you progress through your project!**

How many sources do I need?

Inevitably, students in research writing classes always ask how many sources
they need to include in their research projects. In one sense, "how many sources
do I need?" is a utilitarian question, one usually attached to a student's
exploration of what it will take to get a particular grade. Considered more
abstractly, this question is also an effort to explore the scope of a research project.

Like a certain page or word count requirement, the question "how many sources do I need?" is an effort to get a handle on the scope of the research project assignment. In that sense, asking about the number of sources is probably a good idea, a little like asking how much something weighs before you attempt to pick it up.

But ultimately, there is no right or wrong answer to this question. Longer research projects tend to have evidence from more different sources than shorter projects, but there is no cut-and-dry formula where "X" number of pages will equal "X" number of sources.

However, an annotated bibliography should contain significantly more entries than you intend or expect to include in your research project. For example, if you think you will need or if your instructor requires you to have research from about seven different sources, you should probably have about 15 different entries on your annotated bibliography.

The reasons you need to find twice as many sources as you are likely to use is that you want to find and use the *best* research you can reasonably find, not the *first* pieces of research you can find. Usually, researchers have to look at a lot more information than they would ever include in a research writing project to begin making judgements about their research. And by far the worst thing you can do in your research is to stop right after you have found the number of sources required by the instructor for your project.

Using Computers to Write Annotated Bibliographies

Personal computers, word-processing software, and the Internet can make putting together an annotated bibliography more useful and a lot easier. If you use word-processing software to create your annotated bibliography, you can dramatically simplify the process of creating a "works cited" or "references" page, which is a list of the sources you quote in your research project. All you will have to do is "copy and paste" the citation from the annotated bibliography into your research project—that is, using the functions of your computer and word processing software, "copy" the full citation that you have completed on your annotated bibliography page and "paste" it into the works cited page of your research project.

This same sort of "copy and paste" function also comes in handy when doing research on the web. For example, you can usually copy and paste the citation information from your library's online database for pieces of evidence you are interested in reading. In most cases, you should be able to "copy and paste" information you find in your library's online database into a word processing file. Many library databases—both for books and for periodicals—also have a feature that will allow you to email yourself results from a search.

Keep two things in mind about using computers for your annotated bibliographies:

• You will have to reformat whatever information you get from the Internet or your library's databases in order to meet MLA or APA style.

• **Don't use the copy and paste feature to plagiarize!** Simply copying things like abstracts defeats one of the important purposes for writing an annotated bibliography in the first place, and it's cheating.

Assignment: Writing an Annotated Bibliography

As you conduct your research for your research writing project, compile an annotated bibliography with 15-20 entries. Each entry in your annotated bibliography should contain a citation, a brief summary of the cited material. You will be completing the project in phases and a complete and revised version of it will be due when you have completed your research.

You should think of your annotated bibliography as having roughly twice as many sources as the number of sources you will need to include for the research project, but your instructor might have a different requirement regarding the number of sources required.

Also, you should work on this assignment in parts. Going to the library and trying to complete this assignment in one sitting could turn this into a dreadful writing experience. However, if you complete it in stages, you will have a much better understanding of how your resources relate to each other.

You will probably need to discuss with your instructor the style of citation you need to follow for your research project and your annotated bibliography. Following a citation style isn't difficult to do, but you will want to be consistent and aware of the "rules" from the beginning. In other words, if you start off using MLA style, don't switch to APA style halfway through your annotated bibliography or your research project.

☛ **Hyperlink:** For an explanation of the differences of and the guidelines for using both MLA and APA style, see "Chapter 12, "Citing Your Researching Using MLA or APA Style."

Last, but not least, you will need to discuss with your instructor the sorts of materials you need to include in your research and your annotated bibliography. You may be required to include a balance of research from scholarly and non-scholarly sources, and from "traditional" print resources (books, magazines, journals, newspapers, and so forth) and the Internet.

Questions to ask while writing and researching
• Would you classify the material as a primary or a secondary source? Does the research seem to be difficult to categorize this way? (For more information on primary and secondary sources, see Chapter 1, "Thinking

Critically About Research" and the section "Primary versus Secondary Research").

- Is the research from a scholarly or a non-scholarly publication? Does the research seem difficult to categorize this way?

- Is the research from the Internet—a web page, a newsgroup, an email message, etc.? **Remember: while Internet research is not necessarily "bad" research, you do need to be more careful in evaluating the credibility of Internet-based sources.** (For more information on evaluating Internet research, see Chapter 1, "Thinking Critically About Research," and the sections "The Internet: The Researcher's Challenge" and "Evaluating the Quality and Credibility of Your Research."

- Do you know who wrote the material you are including in your annotated bibliography? What qualifications does your source say the writer has?

- Why do you think the writer wrote it? Do they have a self-interest or a political viewpoint that might make them overly biased?

- Besides the differences between scholarly, non-scholarly, and Internet sources, what else do you know about where your research was published? Is it an academic book? An article in a respected journal? An article in a news magazine or newspaper?

- When was it published? Given your research topic, how important do you think the date of publication is?

- Are you keeping your summaries brief and to the point, focusing on the point your research source is trying to make?

- If it's part of the assignment, are you including a sentence or two about how you see this piece of research fitting into your overall research project?

Revision and Review
Because of its ongoing nature, revising an annotated bibliography is a bit different than the typical revision process. Take opportunities as you compile your annotated bibliography to show your work in progress to your classmates, your instructor, and other readers you trust. If you are working collaboratively on your research projects, you will certainly want to share your annotated bibliography with classmates who are working on a similar topic. Working together like this can be a very useful way to get more ideas about where your research is going.

It is best to approach the annotated bibliography in smaller steps—five or six entries at a time. If that's how you're approaching this project, then you will always be in a process of revision and review with your classmates and your

instructor. You and your readers (your instructor and your classmates) should think about these questions as you revise, review, and add entries:

• Are the summaries you are including brief and to the point? Do your readers understand what the cited articles are about?

• Are you following a particular style guide consistently?

• If you are including a sentence or two about each of your resources, how do these sentences fit with your working thesis? Are they clarifying parts of your working thesis that were previously unclear? Are they suggesting changes to the approach you took when you began the research process?

• Based on the research you have so far, what other types of research do you think you need to find?