Writing the (Dreaded) Annotated Bibliography

What is an Annotated Bibliography?

An annotated bibliography, in its purest form, is simply a list of sources and a description of each source. Aside from being an often required homework assignment in beginning college English courses, the annotated bibliography has a practical use as well. The idea of an annotated bibliography is that it gives you a springboard to write your essay. With this nasty (but helpful!) little tool, you compile all of your sources in their proper citation format and then you describe, briefly, what the content of the source is and its significance to your essay. This way, by the time you are done with your annotated bibliography, you can see what you have to work with, and what you still need more of.

Annotated Bibliography vs. Works Cited/Reference Page

An annotated bibliography is sometimes confused with a works cited/reference page. Although they do not differ too much, the difference is important. A works cited page (in MLA) or a reference page (in APA) is simply the first part of an annotated bibliography. It is the part where the source is fully cited in the proper format (MLA, APA, Chicago, etc.). Your annotated bibliography, however, enhances this. To turn a works cited/reference page into an annotated bibliography, you must add the description of the source and its content. Here’s a comparison of a works cited vs. an annotated bibliography:

Reference List (in APA format):


Annotated Bibliography (in APA format):


This study took 300 participants who were unfamiliar with yoga and tested the effects of this ancient method on reducing the participants’ State Anxiety. Participants were
assigned to either the yoga practice group or the yoga theory group. Before and after a 2 hour session, participants’ State Anxiety scores were tested via the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory. Both groups showed significant decrease in anxiety symptoms after the session. The anxiety scores of the yoga practice group decreased by 14.5% and the yoga theory group’s scores declined by 3.4%.

***It is important to note that everything except the first line of the citation is indented five spaces. In both an annotated bibliography and a good old-fashioned works cited page, everything related to that particular source is indented except for the first line with the author’s name at the beginning. This is true for both APA and MLA formatting.

**What Should Be in an Annotated Bibliography?**

As previously stated, first you’ll want to put the source into the proper citation format (whichever one is assigned to you by your professor). Then comes the “annotated” aspect of the annotated bibliography. This part is simply a description of your source, but be sure to put what is relevant about it. Random details may be interesting, but you will probably have a rather short amount of space to sum up an entire work, so your annotation should “cut to the chase,” so to speak. If you are writing an annotated bibliography for a research article, then write what is pertinent to your paper (or what you think will be pertinent to it). If you are writing an annotated bibliography for an argumentative paper, then include the parts of the text that will be important for backing your argument. Even if this is an assignment, make it count. Take advantage of your annotated bibliography to help you organize your material and form a better essay.

**Make it Make Sense**

The last thing to remember when you are writing your annotated bibliography is to make it make sense. By this, I mean making it fluid. In the annotated bibliography example above, the annotation begins by introducing the study and the participants. Then it progresses into what the study entailed and what the participants did. At the end, it sums up the study by showing the results. The annotation has a consistent rhythm and can easily be followed by the reader. As with an essay, have a plan as to how you want the annotation to pan out. Start with one subject matter or idea then neatly segue into another. This will make your ideas and the text’s content much easier to follow.