Summarize the contents of a source for an annotated bibliography

To summarize a source usefully for an annotated bibliography, you will need to carefully describe and show that you understand it and specify how it relates to your topic.

For an overview of related key topics on summarizing sources, visit the videos and quizzes in this tutorial.

Explore It

An annotated bibliography is a list of the sources you collect, including all those you consult or all those you end up citing in your final research paper. An annotated bibliography allows your reader to see the depth of your research along with your understanding of the topic. Alongside publication information, the entries in an annotated bibliography can contain both descriptive and evaluative information on each source. The descriptive annotation for a source should include a summary that briefly gives accurate information about the content of the source.

The following example appears in a published annotated bibliography on humor studies in the field of psychology. This entry includes a brief, descriptive summary of a journal article:

**Entry in an Annotated Bibliography**

Selectively reviews the literature on humor in counseling/psychotherapy from 1970 through 1990, and discusses the topics of: the controversy regarding appropriateness/effectiveness of humor in therapy; the various modes of therapy; the need for training in the area; the definitions, guidelines, and techniques of humor in therapy; and the relevance of clinical data; a 67-item bibliography is included.

This annotated bibliography appears as a chapter in a reference work on the psychology of humor. Therefore, its entries describe research studies, their conclusions, and their implications, without commentary.


Learn It

When you create an annotated bibliography, you document key information about each source you located, including a brief description. Often, instructors assign annotated bibliographies as a formal assignment. The annotated bibliography can also be useful as a part of a large research project, to help you keep track of the key points in your sources and recall how they relate to one another.

The entries of your annotated bibliography should show how each source supports the main points of your research project. When you are given an annotated bibliography assignment, be sure to clarify what format you are required to follow. Also, find out whether your instructor expects you to create annotations that include only descriptions of the sources or whether the annotations must also include evaluation or interpretation of each source. Check whether your assignment specifies entries of a particular length. Should your annotations be brief phrases, complete sentences, or full paragraphs? Whatever style of annotation you use, check to be sure your entries are consistent in the elements they include—in format and sentence structure for each entry.

Whether your annotated bibliography requires descriptive summaries of sources or evaluative annotations, a basic summary of each source is necessary for any annotated bibliography. Following are some guidelines for creating summaries to be used in an annotated bibliography.

GUIDELINES FOR SUMMARIZING SOURCES IN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHIES

- Determine the main idea of the source material.
- State the main idea of the source, including only the most important supporting details.
- When writing the summary of a source, do not comment or interpret.
- Convey your understanding of the source but do not allow your summary to distort its meaning.
- Specify how the source relates to the topic of your research project.

Use It

Look at the following sample entries from published annotated bibliographies available in Questia. (Or if you prefer, find an example of an annotated bibliography relevant to a current research project and read several sample entries.) As you read the examples, look carefully at how the annotations summarize a source. Consider what descriptive information is included in each annotation. Also note what information, if any, may be left out of the summary.

Next, determine whether each entry includes evaluative information or whether it is summary only. If the annotation includes commentary about the source, what purpose does the evaluation serve? What point of view does the author of the annotation take when offering his or her evaluation?


This article reviews the trends in privatization, experience with government management of the privatization process, and the economic, social, and political challenges facing governments in developing countries. Many of these governments must still resolve the crucial issues regarding which services and functions should be retained under state control and which should be privatized, how privatization should be done, how business and public agencies can most effectively work together to facilitate the process, and the scope and degree of supervision governments should exercise over privatized companies.


Walgren’s professional photography makes this book an exceptional contribution to the informational literature on the Lost Boys of the Sudan. Gr. 4–8


In this picture book, illustrated by the brilliant, expressionistic artist R. Gregory Christie, Williams tells of the thousands of boys orphaned and made homeless in the world’s longest civil war. On their own and in order to survive, they organized themselves into smaller groups, with some of the older boys serving as stand-in parents for younger children. Gr. K–8

—from Jane M. Gangi, “Annotated Bibliography of Children’s Literature Resources on War, Terrorism, and Disaster since 1945: By Continents/countries for Grades K–8,” *Childhood Education*, August 15, 2009