

Annotated Bibliographies for Dummies

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Gentile's article takes you through the process of writing an Annotated Bibliography. She bases the steps on her own experience of writing an annotated bib her freshman year of college. From learning how to pick out useful mastery texts to providing excerpts from her own example, she demonstrates how this genre can truly come in handy.

Imagine yourself sitting in a classroom, listening to your history teacher assign a ten-page research paper that requires all sorts of sources and information. This paper is due a month from now and you think to yourself, "I can just wait to do it until the last couple of days before. This should be an easy assignment anyway." After a month of major procrastination and avoidance, you find yourself sitting in front of your computer the night before the assignment is due with a blank document before your eyes. You have absolutely no sources, not a single word on an outline, or even an idea to start off with. I found myself in this exact situation throughout my high school career. Fortunately, in college, I started using a tool called an annotated bibliography that helps in situations like the one I describe above.

I was first introduced to annotated bibliographies in one of my high school English classes. I was never required to actually complete one in that class, but I did learn the basic steps of the process. I became interested in this type of genre right away, as I thought to myself, "this could be really helpful." The idea of not having to go back and search through each source when I was writing the research project truly intrigued me. I could

complete all of the hard research at the start of my work instead of waiting until the end.

It was not until the beginning of my college career that I decided to create an annotated bibliography. In my English 101 class, I could choose to complete any sort of research genre as a project. After looking around through various examples of papers, journals, and articles, I decided an annotated bibliography would be the most interesting. After knowing I wanted to do research for this type of genre, I gathered a set of “mastery texts,” which are useful examples of the genre you are creating. To find these texts, I searched the Internet for different examples of annotated bibliographies to mark up and evaluate (See Figures 1 and 2 for examples). Three to five different annotated bibliographies were plenty to get a good idea of what this genre consists of. After printing them off, I went through each one and highlighted different features I thought were important. I looked at each detail closely and figured out exactly what I needed to include in my final project. I wrote comments on the side of the mastery texts, too, so I would clearly remember all of my thoughts.

After I could barely see white on the paper anymore, it was time for my next step in investigating the genre. I took all the different notes I wrote on the Internet examples and transferred them onto what is called a rubric. This rubric is a set of criteria that needs to be included in an

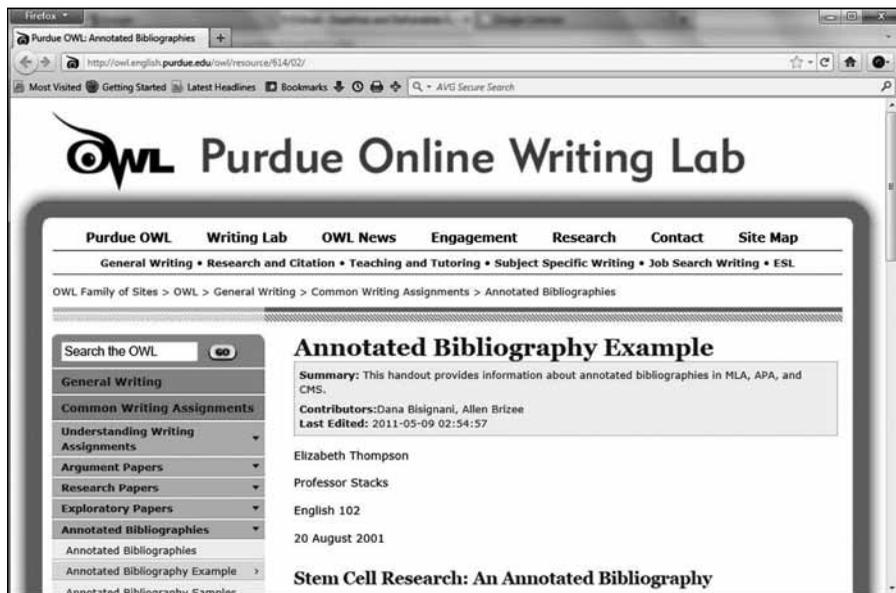


Figure 1: Purdue Online Writing Lab
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/614/02/>

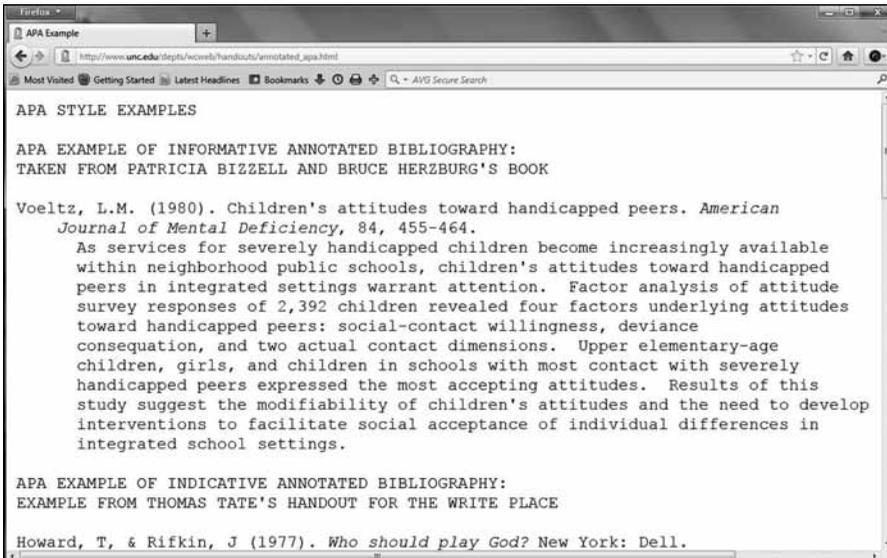


Figure 2: The University of North Carolina's Writing Center
http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/annotated_apa.html

annotated bibliography. It was easy to compile all of the features because all of the mastery texts had important similarities. For example, I noticed that each citation in each bibliography was in bold letters. In addition, I noticed that each summary was to the point and did not include too many details. I found that the assessment and reflection portions were personal and opinionated as well. Because of this, I knew these features definitely needed to be included within the rubric. I'll talk more about my rubric and how it helped me write in a bit, but right now I want to actually give a definition of the annotated bibliography and what I use it for.

An annotated bibliography is a set of summaries or evaluations of sources related to one large topic. Searching for multiple sources related to a topic can become very lengthy, but having a variety of summaries of those sources can help with the writing process for any kind of research. This is my interpretation of an annotated bibliography, but different situations will require different interpretations. For example, an instructor in a different class may have a different understanding of an annotated bibliography. As I said above, I use the annotated bibliography to help myself be prepared for large research projects, but of course, you can use it for other purposes. I want to take you through the process of how I assemble my annotated bibliography so you can see and hopefully use some of my techniques and ideas.

Process

When I start off my annotated bibliography, I ask myself what research question I am trying to answer. What is the main purpose or topic of this research project? I know that if I make this clear to myself from the very beginning, narrowing down searches later on will be a lot easier. After I choose my topic, I create a working title, and I write it very precisely at the top of my paper in bold letters: **Genetic Engineering: An Annotated Bibliography.**

In the Library

After I choose my topic and the title is successfully written, it's time to actually do my research. I start off at Milner Library. I usually go straight to the books and in this case, I looked thoroughly through the genetics section. The good thing about annotated bibliographies is that for books all you really have to do is scan the pages to get a summary of what the book is about. The summaries are not supposed to tell you each exact detail of the book, but rather give an overview of what the book is about. I scan through several books and generally find a lot of quality information that helps me understand what the book covers. I also make sure that the book I'm scanning will help me write my paper and be useful later on. If the book isn't useful or related to my topic, I don't include it in the annotated bibliography. I have sticky notes next to me while searching through all of the books to mark any pages that have especially great information that I may want to find quickly later on.

After I have found a good number of books, I also surf the Internet and databases as well. In this case, I used the Proquest Platinum database, accessible through Milner Library's website, which had a lot of good information. It also has abstracts at the beginning of each article so it's easy to see what the source will be about. For this particular assignment, I used three articles total. After the library trip, I also read through magazines and newspapers and watched videos on YouTube to help find more resources. Although searching through these sources helped me with more ideas, I did not use them for my project. Once I find enough reliable sources and have adequate summaries of what they are about, I start my bibliography.

On the next page is an entry taken from my annotated bibliography on designer babies. I have written comments to show how I used my genre research and rubric to create this entry.

McGee, G. (2000). *The perfect baby* (2nd ed.). Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

This book focuses on the philosophy of reproductive genetics and cloning through the eyes of certain “experts.” These people can range from a mouse geneticist to a retired physicist. Although there are thousands of books and articles related to this topic, this book focuses on the effects that reproductive technologies have on the child who came from them. It also touches on what it means to be the parent who decided to use these procedures. Additionally, the book shows the relationship between philosophy, social science, and public life in general. This edition specifically explores all technologies and possibilities that have emerged since the 1990s. Changes in genetics and reproduction have been created at such a rapid pace throughout the years, and this book is one that takes its audience through the ride. It makes it clear that the chance of covering all aspects of newly made technologies is nearly impossible, but it gives an invitation to explore the most important aspects. Instead of completely demoralizing the issue of genetic engineering, the author simply discusses intelligent goals within social and political contexts.

This book seems like a fairly reliable source, in my opinion. Instead of reviewing the attacks or defenses related to reproductive technologies, McGee decides to write about texts written by actual scientists or parents themselves. This makes the research more reliable, as the opinions and facts are coming from individuals dealing with the issue first hand. It is not biased because he discusses further goals as well, while trying not to declare a side which he is on. He somewhat describes both sides of the issue (just in a few sentences) to start his descriptions of certain issues. His facts are well documented because he acknowledges all of his sources in the beginning of his novel.

I believe the information in this book would be very helpful to complete a research project related to this topic in greater detail. The *Perfect Baby* gives a sense of intelligence, and not simply opinion. The focus on history, philosophy, and other aspects makes it more reliable. Additionally, the sources used give vivid points, as having experienced reproductive processes first hand. The specificity is perfect considering McGee asks questions before every topic he discusses and answers them thoroughly.

← This is an example of a summary of one of the sources I chose. In this case, I used a book. I go into some detail of what the book was about. I do not write every single idea down because I only need to get a basic idea of what is in the source when I go back and read my annotated bibliography.

← This is an example of the assessment I did to follow my summary. I answer several questions that help me see if the source is any good.

- Do I trust the author who wrote this source?
- Does it contain biased information that seems to only support one point of view?
- Is the source well documented?
- Is it current or does it contain old information?
- Is the information scholarly, popular or some of both?

I didn't necessarily use all of these questions; however, they all can help when writing an assessment.

← Each entry should have a summary, assessment, and reflection paragraph. Most annotated bibliographies should be single-spaced without an indentation.

← After these two paragraphs, it was time for me to reflect. This was most helpful for me in the long run and ultimately determined whether or not I would actually use the source. I asked myself more questions.

- Will the information in this book be helpful to me?
- How much opinion is there compared to the number of facts?
- Is the information too general or specific for my topic?
- How will this specific source fit in with my research topic?
- Most importantly, does the source repeat the same concepts as other sources I have already found?

Just as in the assessment, these questions will all be beneficial, but you don't have to use all of them.

More Rubric Details

Length: The length of an annotation depends on the research project I am completing. A twenty page journal article is going to have a longer annotated bibliography than a three-page research paper. The length of the annotation could also depend on the length of the source; a two hundred page book is going to have a longer annotation than a one page news article.

Language: The language of the summary is generally academic because I am writing about an academic source. The assessment and reflection have a personal tone to them because, after all, I am writing information and answering questions that pertain to my specific interests. This is what I have found works best for language based on the mastery texts I looked through. However, you might find the tone of your mastery texts to be somewhat different.

Citation: For my citations, I use APA style because I am an education major and that is the style used in that field. MLA and Chicago Style are common as well, depending on what field you are working in. This bolded annotation should be placed before the three paragraphs and all the annotations should be in alphabetical order. The number of sources you need depends on the project, but for this particular assignment, I found that I needed at least five sources along with citations. I found this number to be the most helpful in preparing so that I do not have too much of the same information at the same time.

Conclusion

All in all, I have a quite helpful process for preparing to write in research genres. Before, I always thought, “All of my ideas will just come to me while completing an assignment, why waste all that time beforehand?” I now know how much better my assignments can be if I complete an annotated bibliography first. I don’t forget to mention any details while also feeling more prepared in the end. I do not stare blankly at my computer screen when starting an assignment because now I have a tool that will give me an idea of where to start and continue on from there. In addition, I know that the sources I am using are reliable and useful to me and my paper, project, and so forth.

Everyone has their own interpretation of what annotated bibliographies can be used for. For example, a professor might assign an annotated bibliography to demonstrate a student’s understanding and ability to connect different texts and concepts. Whatever the case may be, this type of genre is flexible enough to satisfy different writing situations. I have found many positives while creating annotated bibliographies; they’ve been a useful tool that has kept me prepared and organized. I hope they can do the same for you and your research.



Angela Gentile is from West Chicago, Illinois and is currently a sophomore at Illinois State University studying Family and Consumer Science. Since her childhood days “playing school,” she was always aware of her dream of becoming a teacher. She absolutely loves everything about college and is finally experiencing life away from a strict Italian environment. Angela adores her family and friends and truly does not know what she would do without them.