

What is an annotated bibliography?

A *bibliography* is a complete list of the sources that were used to complete a research paper or project.

Depending on the style guide you follow, you may also see this called a *Works Cited* (also called an MLA bibliography) or *Reference List* (APA format). Each listed source, or *citation*, shares information about the author, title, publishing year, and other details that serve to credit the original authors whose work informed your research. These details also help other students and researchers find and read the source materials.

When your research is related to a scholastic assignment, you should always verify your instructor's requirements for the types and number of sources to include, as well as the style you should adhere to when formatting your paper and bibliography.

An MLA annotated bibliography and an APA format annotated bibliography are bibliographies that include a concise explanation, or *annotation*, of each listed source. Depending on the assignment, this annotation may be solely descriptive, or analytical.

Annotations vs Abstract

An abstract and annotation should not be confused; they differ in both their substance as well as their placement in a paper.

Annotations:

- Usually found in bibliographies
- Are subjective
- Purpose is to **summarize** and **evaluate**. It should briefly communicate the work's main point, but also discuss the background of the author or study, and the strengths/weaknesses of the work.

Abstracts:

- Usually found in journal databases
- Are objective
- Purpose is to **summarize**. It should provide a short overview of the article and communicate the main points and themes.

This resource provides additional information on how to write a bibliography with annotations in other formats. You can also take advantage of the plagiarism checker and bibliography tools that come with EasyBib Plus to help you create your reference lists.

Why include annotations?

Before you learn how to make an annotated bibliography, you may be wondering "why?"

Sometimes instructors want you to create and include annotations in your bibliography, either as part of an assignment or as an assignment unto itself. Understanding the purpose of this approach to your references list can help to ensure that you gain all of the benefits that the annotated bibliography process provides.

As a student, this method will help you develop or hone your research skills, providing you with practice not only in locating sources but also in analyzing and evaluating them for relevance and quality.

Your instructor will gain insight into your research abilities, as well, allowing them to assess your work more thoroughly. If you plan to publish your research, this comprehensive approach to detailing your sources will provide readers and other researchers with a substantial directory of resources to evaluate for their own work.

Whether you're publishing or submitting your annotated bibliography, make sure your spelling and wording is correct!

Step 1: Analyze your sources

Each annotation should be a summarization or analysis of your source. If you have been tasked with writing annotations as part of a research paper or project, begin to create both the citation and notes on the source while you identify and analyze your sources.

Not only will this approach help you to hone your research skills and identify sources that are relevant and useful for your topic, but you will also save time. When done in this manner, both your citations and annotations will be nearly complete before you begin to write the body of your paper.

Analyzing your potential sources requires a two-pronged approach that first evaluates the author, publication, and date, and then examines the content.

When conducting your initial assessment of the source, consider some of the following questions to guide your appraisal:

- What qualifies the author to write on this subject?
- Is the author affiliated with a reputable institution in this field?
- Is the author credentialed or otherwise considered an expert in this field?
- Is this source current?
- Is this the most recent edition?
- Is the publisher reputable?
- Is the journal reputable?

Once your primary evaluation is complete, you will move on to assessing the content itself. Consider some of these elements as you review each source:

- Who is the intended audience?

- Is the author presenting her opinion or interpretation as the truth, or stating facts?
- What supporting evidence does the author provide?
- Did the author perform the research, or curate and present the research of others?
- If the author used the research of others, are the sources the author cites credible?
- Are there errors or omissions of fact?
- Is the author writing objectively and without bias?

Also, consider the value each source provides to you:

- Is the information helpful for your particular assignment?
- Does it help answer your research question(s)?
- Is this source different from your other sources, or does it repeat information you already have?
- Is the source providing you with a different perspective on your topic, or changing your beliefs or thinking about your subject?

To make it easier for you to create your reference page, write your notes in the format you will be using when you construct this part of the assignment. Once you have identified all of the sources you wish to include, you will merely need to insert what you have already written on the page and write your introduction, which is explained in the next section.

For an MLA bibliography example (with annotations), scroll down and check out our visual example of an MLA annotated bibliography below.

Step 2: Write the descriptions

An annotated bibliography entry may be written either as direct phrases or complete sentences. Your instructor will advise you of which approach you are required to take.

Annotations should include either:

- The main points from the source, as well as the topics covered, the approach used and any findings.
- Or your critical evaluation.

Tips:

- A standard annotation is approximately one paragraph.
- Take care not to include any unnecessary details, as the goal is to summarize each source as succinctly as possible and, in some cases, evaluate them.
- Your field of study or instructor will determine what format your annotated bibliography will use. In this guide, you'll find examples of an MLA and an APA annotated bibliography.

Example:

Here is an annotated bibliography example MLA annotation for the book *The Elements of Eloquence: Secrets of the Perfect Turn of Phrase* by UK author and blogger Mark Forsyth:

The author, Mark Forsyth, examines the rhetorical devices used in the English language, analyzing the patterns and formats that create memorable quotes. He traces the history of rhetoric to the Ancient Greeks, and provides an abridged timeline, following their use and evolution through to modern day. The author also explores the broader subject of persuasion and maps out the role that the figures of rhetoric play in it. In all, he examines over thirty devices, dissecting notable passages and phrases from pop music, the plays of William Shakespeare, the Bible, and more to explore the figures of rhetoric at work within each of them. Thorough definitions accompany this examination of structure to demonstrate how these formulas have been used to generate famously memorable expressions as well as how to reproduce their effects.

Notice how the annotated bibliography MLA entry above is descriptive enough so the reader has an idea of what the source is about with just a single paragraph. For more information on annotations, check out this informative site. If you're looking to strengthen your writing in general, reading these grammar guides could be a good start.

For guidance on creating entries in MLA format, APA format, and more styles, check out the EasyBib library of resources or try the EasyBib annotation tool—we talk about it below!

Step 3a: Formatting an MLA style annotated bibliography

The MLA Style Center provides the following guidance for formatting an MLA annotated bibliography:

- Title your reference page as “Annotated Bibliography” or “Annotated List of Works Cited.”
- Include annotations after the full, listed reference.
- Annotations should typically not exceed a single paragraph.
- If you do exceed one paragraph, indent each new paragraph and separate with a single space between them.

Here are general MLA bibliography format guidelines that also apply:

- Organize sources alphabetically by author or title, by the publication date, or by subject. Ask your instructor how they would like this organized if they haven't provided specific guidance.
- The entire bibliography MLA page or pages should be double-spaced.
- Have 1-inch margins around the page.

Book example

Here is the source's citation and annotation in MLA bibliography format. It contains a summary for the book *The Elements of Eloquence: Secrets of the Perfect Turn of Phrase* by UK author and blogger Mark Forsyth:

Forsyth, Mark. *The Elements of Eloquence: Secrets of the Perfect Turn of Phrase*. Penguin Books, 2014.

The author, Mark Forsyth, examines the rhetorical devices used in the English language, analyzing the patterns and formats that create memorable quotes. He traces the history of rhetoric to the Ancient Greeks, and provides an abridged timeline, following their use and evolution through to modern day. The author also explores the broader subject of persuasion and maps out the role that the figures of rhetoric play in it. In all, he examines over thirty devices, dissecting notable passages and phrases from pop music, the plays of William Shakespeare, the Bible, and more to explore the figures of rhetoric at work within each of them. Thorough definitions accompany this examination of structure to demonstrate how these formulas have been used to generate famously memorable expressions as well as how to reproduce their effects.

Website example

Here is another annotated bibliography example in MLA for an article on the MLA website. Also, below that is an MLA bibliography citation example that shows what the entry would look like without an annotation:

Citation with annotation:

“What Guidance Should I Give My Students for Preparing an Annotated Bibliography?” *The MLA Style Center*, The Modern Language Association, 4 Nov. 2016, style.mla.org/annotated-bibliographies/.

This article offers brief and clear directions for MLA formatting of a bibliography with annotations. Citing James Harner’s *On Compiling an Annotated Bibliography*, it provides guidelines for writing annotations that can be applied to either paraphrase or commentary form. It also demonstrates how writing annotations can benefit students who are tasked with researching a subject and offers instruction on the organization of entries and acceptable page titles. While the advice is tailored to respond to a question posed by an instructor, students and researchers may also benefit from the guidance that the MLA provided.

Citation without annotation:

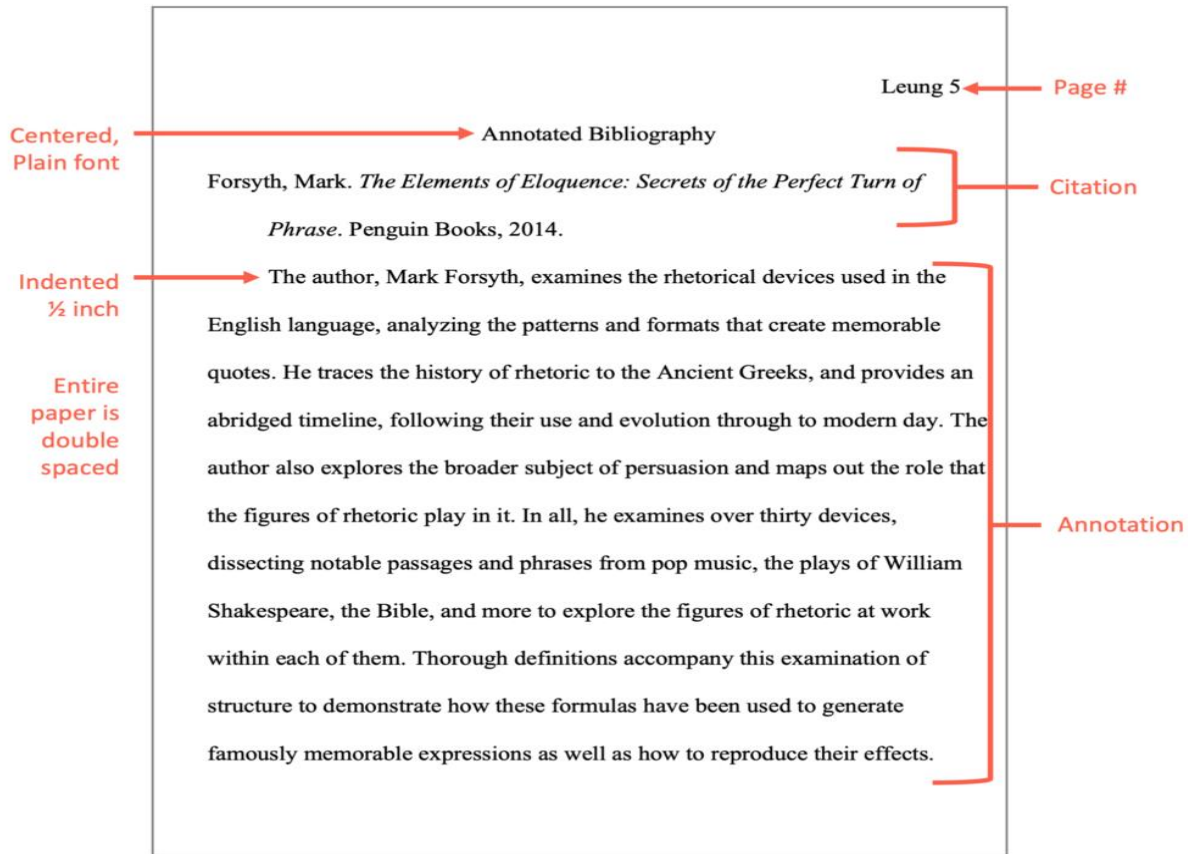
The following is a bibliography in MLA format example for an article on the MLA website. This MLA bibliography example shows what the entry will look like without an annotation:

“What Guidance Should I Give My Students for Preparing an Annotated Bibliography?” *The MLA Style Center*, The Modern Language Association, 4 Nov. 2016, style.mla.org/annotated-bibliographies/

Reminder: Whether or not you have annotations, all references in a bibliography MLA are organized in alphabetical order, top to bottom of the page, by the first letter in the reference. That is usually the author, but sometimes it’s the source’s title.

Visual example

Here is one last MLA bibliography example that shows how each entry will appear within a formatted reference page.



Note that this MLA bibliography does not contain an introductory paragraph. If you are including a prefatory section, it should reside between the page title and the initial entry.

Background

The MLA follows the rules set forth in James L. Harner's *On Compiling An Annotated Bibliography*, 2nd Edition, which they published in 2000.

The "prefatory matter" functions similarly to an introduction, and "typically consists of an introduction, an explanation of editorial procedures, acknowledgements, and separate lists of abbreviations, major reference sources searched, and the subject author's works" (7). He expands on this, "You must explain – and, if necessary, offer a rationale for – the taxonomy, the kinds of works included and excluded, and the chronologic