

*Note: The guidelines below are general suggestions to help you write an annotated bibliography for a history class. Your professor might provide specific guidelines that provide more detail than the information here. Always follow your professor's instructions.

Annotated Bibliographies

What is an annotated bibliography?

An annotated bibliography is a description of a set of related sources that address a common topic. It is a very useful tool in helping you analyze sources and organize your research. Professors will often assign annotated bibliographies when they want to help you figure out which sources will be most important to your project and in what ways you will make use of the sources. At other times, professors assign them as an exercise in and of themselves, to help you take the first steps toward mastering a body of historical literature. Depending on the guidelines from your professor, a source entry in an annotated bibliography will be anywhere from a short paragraph to a page long.

What are the components of an annotated bibliography?

An annotated bibliography usually contains three parts:

- **Source Citation:** Like a regular bibliography, an annotated bibliography provides proper citation information for each source. Remember that historians usually use Chicago style. Visit our citation section for information about formatting your citations. Your professor may allow other styles, such as MLA; check which style your professor recommends.
- **Source Summary:** The first part of your entry will summarize the source concisely. Aim not to dazzle your professor with extensive detail, but to state briefly the topic and main argument of your source. If you are annotating a secondary source, in addition to summarizing the main idea, you will want to give information about how the source is organized, the main types of evidence the author relies on, and how the author makes his or her argument. If you are annotating a primary source, in addition to the main idea, explain the type of source (e.g. a letter, newspaper, census report, etc.), identify the author (include the author's position and other information to help the reader understand the writer's perspective and why s/he was in a position to create the source), and state the author's intended audience.
- **Source Evaluation:** Your source evaluation explains how the source contributes to a particular topic. If you are producing an annotated bibliography in anticipation of writing a research paper, your professor might ask you to consider exactly how you will use the source in your paper. What does the source do for your argument? Is it one of the key pieces of evidence supporting your case? Does it offer crucial background information? Does it present a counterpoint to your argument that you need to address? Other professors might want you to focus more on an evaluation of the source itself. In this case, be sure to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the source. Did you find the argument persuasive? If so, explain what made the argument work well. Were you unconvinced by some of the author's claims? If so, explain why. You will also want to

put the source into the context of the field as a whole. What does this source teach us that we did not know before? Is it filling in a particular gap in the field? Is it refuting a long-held assumption? Authors will often explain how they understand the contribution of their work, so begin by looking in the introduction for such information.

While the **source citation**, **summary**, and **evaluation** are the key components of an annotated bibliography entry, your professor might also ask you to include other information, such as:

- **A list of related sources.** The purpose of listing related sources is to position the source you have annotated in its appropriate historiographical field. Note the work's place in dialogue with other sources. Is your source responding to a specific article or book? Is your source considered the foundational work in a field? Where does the author of your source position him or herself in relation to other scholarship on the subject? A good way to figure out what related sources to list is to look at the author's footnotes. What studies does the author rely on the most? Note that you do not need to annotate these related sources. Your job is to describe in a sentence or two what the source is about and how it relates to the main source you have just annotated.

What are the steps for writing an annotated bibliography?

1. The first step is to decide which sources will be most critical for your topic. Often, your professor will assign an annotated bibliography relatively early on in the writing process, so perhaps you do not yet know exactly which sources will be the most important or how exactly you will use them. To help you figure that out, think about the research questions that led you to your topic in the first place and then think about which sources would best help you answer those questions. A major benefit of writing an annotated bibliography is that, by the end of it, you will have a far better idea of what your project looks like, what you are arguing, and what evidence you have to support your argument.

2. Once you have identified your key sources, **the second step** is to put into writing the main argument of each source. To help you glean the author's argument, take a step back and look at the big picture. What problem is this author trying to address? What holes in our knowledge does the writer intend to fill? If you had to describe this source to someone who had never read it, what would you say? If you are having trouble capturing the main idea, reread the author's introduction and conclusion. In those sections, the author is likely to lay out in detail the larger argument.

3. Now that you know the main argument of the source, **the third step** is to figure out how successfully the author supported the argument. Look back through the source and see exactly what evidence the author used to make his or her case. Is there enough evidence? Do you agree with how the author interpreted the evidence? In this step, you will also want to put this source into conversation with other sources. Ask how this source fits in with the other ones you have read. Does it agree with them? Disagree? Did you find some sources more convincing than others? If so, why?

4. The fourth step is figure out how this source will be most helpful to you when writing your paper. Once again, return to your original research questions. If you have a working thesis statement, revisit that as well. Ask yourself: What did I learn from this source? What gaps in my knowledge did this source help me fill? Now that I have read this source, has my thinking about my topic changed? Think about the actual structure or outline of your paper. At what point in your paper do you think you will draw on this source? Why will it be particularly useful to you at that point?

5. The fifth step is to put it all together. At the top of each entry, write down the citation information. Then delve into your summary. In an annotated bibliography, every sentence counts, so make sure your writing is direct and that you articulate the main points you want to make efficiently. Once you have summarized the source, move onto your evaluation, discussing whether or not you found the source convincing and/or how you will use it in your project. Be sure to include any other information your professor has directed.

Sample Annotated Bibliographies:

Blanchard, Paula. *Sarah Orne Jewett: Her World and Her Work*. New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1994.

Part of the Radcliffe Biography Series, which publishes the life stories of prominent American women, Blanchard's book is the definitive biography on Jewett. As her subtitle implies, she not only seeks to illuminate the events of Jewett's life, but also to contextualize her writings and provide a critical reading of her most famous works. Many of the chapters in Blanchard's biography are devoted specifically to major texts, such as *Deephaven*, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, and *The Tory Lover*. Blanchard provides background on Jewett's writing process (such as where she wrote and the degree of revisions she made) as well as brief literary analyses. Most of Blanchard's chapters are centered on key relationships and themes in Jewett's own life. Blanchard argues that it is only by thoroughly situating Jewett in her historical moment that we can understand her literary work, thereby issuing a critique of scholars who claim we can study Jewett's canon in isolation.

Particularly useful for my project are the chapters that discuss Jewett's coterie of literary friends in New England and her close relationship with Annie Fields. In a chapter entitled, "Neither Marrying Nor Giving in Marriage," Blanchard seeks to uncover Jewett's own motivations for remaining single, as well as place Jewett's single status within the scholarly conversation about nineteenth-century unmarried women. She aligns herself with both Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Lillian Faderman in saying that Jewett's personal friendships and relationships with women (as well as male family members) were sufficiently fulfilling for her and therefore precluded a desire to marry. I will use Blanchard's text in my paper to support my argument that unmarried women were deeply enmeshed in their communities, rather than being social pariahs stigmatized as "old maids." I will also use some aspects of Blanchard's argument as a point of departure, however, as I disagree with her claim that women's close female friendships precluded marriage. Rather, I see Jewett's friendships as helping her craft a meaningful life as a single woman instead of inhibiting her desire or ability to marry.

Glickman, Lawrence B. *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997.

Glickman traces the history of the idea of a living wage from the end of the Civil War to the 1930s. He argues that American workers moved from seeing themselves as producers to seeing themselves as consumers, which in turn altered American attitudes towards wage labor and the role of government in the workplace. Relying mainly on discourse analysis, Glickman divides his book into four parts that track the changing rhetoric of wage labor in different sectors of American society. Situated in two different historiographies, Glickman's book brings together scholarship on labor history and consumer history. His contributions mainly center on identifying the agency of workers in labor reform and New Deal policies, as well as in showing that consumerism engaged workers more fully in the civic sphere rather than depoliticizing them. He also demonstrates that wage labor was heavily racialized and gendered. The book's main weakness is Glickman's heavy reliance on discourse analysis as a methodology. By placing so much emphasis on rhetoric, Glickman does not give the reader a sense of the details of labor reform, nor does he connect idealized rhetoric with the actual lived experiences of American workers.