

WRITING AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

What is an annotated bibliography?

An annotated bibliography gives an account of the research that has been done on a given topic. Like any bibliography, an annotated bibliography is an alphabetical list of research sources. In addition to bibliographic data, an annotated bibliography provides a concise summary of each source and some assessment of its value or relevance. Depending on your assignment, an annotated bibliography may be one stage in a larger research project, or it may be an independent project standing on its own.

Selecting the sources:

The quality and usefulness of your bibliography will depend on your selection of sources. Define the scope and limits of your research carefully so that you can make good judgments about what to include and exclude:

- What **problem** am I investigating? What **question(s)** am I trying to pursue? If your bibliography is part of a research project, this project will probably be governed by a research question. If your bibliography is an independent project on a general topic (e.g. aboriginal women and Canadian law), try formulating your topic as a question or a series of questions in order to define your search more precisely (e.g. How has Canadian law affecting aboriginal women changed as a result of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms? How have these changes affected aboriginal women? How have aboriginal women influenced and responded to these legal developments?).
- What **kind of material** am I looking for? (academic books and journal articles? government reports or policy statements? articles from the popular press? primary historical sources? etc.)
- Am I finding **essential studies** on my topic? (Read footnotes in useful articles carefully to see what sources they use and why. Keep an eye out for studies that are referred to by several of your sources.)

Summarizing the argument of a source:

An annotation briefly restates the main argument of a source. An annotation of an academic source, for example, typically identifies its thesis (or research question, or hypothesis), its major methods of investigation, and its main conclusions. **Keep in mind that identifying the argument of a source is a different task than describing or listing its contents.** Rather than listing contents (*Example 1 below*), an annotation should account for **why** the contents are there (*Example 2*).

Ex. 1

Only lists contents

Mclvor, S. D. (1995). Aboriginal women's rights as "existing rights." Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme 2/3, 34-38.

This article discusses recent constitutional legislation as it affects the human rights of aboriginal women in Canada: the *Constitution Act* (1982), its amendment in 1983, and amendments to the *Indian Act* (1985). It also discusses the implications for aboriginal women of the Supreme Court of Canada's interpretation of the *Constitution Act* in *R. v. Sparrow* (1991).

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Ex. 2

**Identifies
the
argument**

This article seeks to define the extent of the civil and political rights returned to aboriginal women in the *Constitution Act* (1982), in its amendment in 1983, and in amendments to the *Indian Act* (1985). This legislation reverses prior laws that denied Indian status to aboriginal women who married non-aboriginal men. On the basis of the Supreme Court of Canada's interpretation of the *Constitution Act* in *R. v. Sparrow* (1991), Mclvor argues that the *Act* recognizes fundamental human rights and existing aboriginal rights, granting to aboriginal women full participation in the aboriginal right to self-government.

research
question

method &
main
conclusions

The following reading strategies can help you to identify the argument of a source:

- Identify the author's thesis (central claim or purpose) or research question. Both the introduction and the conclusion can help you with this task.
- Look for repetition of key terms or ideas, especially those occurring in the thesis. Follow them through the text and examine what the author does with them.
- Notice whether and how a theory is used to interpret evidence. Identify the method used to investigate the problem/s addressed in the text.
- Notice how the text is laid out and organized. What are the main sections? What is emphasized? Why? Accounting for why will help you move beyond listing contents and toward accounting for argument. Look also for paragraphs that summarize the argument.

Assessing the relevance and value of a source:

Your annotation should now go on to briefly assess the value of the source to an investigation of your research question. If your bibliography is part of a research project, briefly identify how you intend to use the source and why. If your bibliography is an independent project, assess the source's contribution to the research on your topic. Keep in mind models for assessing arguments in your course materials and discipline.

- Are you interested in the way the source frames its research question or in the way it goes about answering that question (its method)? Does the source make new connections or open up new ways of seeing a problem? How effective is the method of investigation? (e.g. bringing the Sparrow decision concerning aboriginal fishing rights to bear on the scope of women's rights)
- Are you interested in the way the source uses a theoretical framework or a key concept? Why do you find this use valuable? Is it problematic in some ways? (e.g. analysis of existing, extinguished, and other kinds of rights)
- Does the source gather and analyze a particular body of evidence that you want to use? How good is the evidence? (e.g. the historical development of a body of legislation)
- How do the source's conclusions bear on your own investigation?