Writing an Annotated Bibliography?

An annotation is a note or evaluative summary of something. A bibliography is a referenced list of sources, usually on a particular topic. An annotated bibliography provides an overview of the research that has been carried out in a particular field. It takes the form of an alphabetical list of sources along with a concise summary and usually an evaluation of each.

Through this process you will demonstrate your analysis, evaluation, synthesis and research skills. You may be producing an annotated bibliography as part of a wider research project, or as an independent assignment. Each course will have its own requirements for how this assignment is tackled – some will require an in-depth critical evaluation, while others will be looking for a more descriptive understanding of each source. This assignment is quite different from others you may have done, although many of the skills will be the same.

Why do one?

The annotated bibliography will:

- Enable you to demonstrate the quality and scope of your reading.
- Provide the opportunity to familiarise yourself with the material and debates on a particular topic.
- Require you to utilise the scope of sources available, such as journals, books, web sites and magazine articles.
- Highlight sources that may be of interest to other readers and researchers.
- Explore and organise sources which could be used for further research, e.g. as the first step toward a literature review.

Finding your sources.

Be clear about the scope and focus of your research so you know what information you are looking for. Choose works which are most relevant, and identify those with a range of perspectives on your topic to find a balanced overview.

What types of material are you looking for: books, journal articles, government policy, opinion pieces, professional organisational publications etc.? Identify the key arguments and look for authors and studies who are frequently mentioned and acknowledged.

Assessing and summarising your sources.

For each source, you will need to give an overview of the argument, the methodologies used and the main conclusions. Also consider the following:

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the source?
- How does it sit within or add to the wider field of research?
- What theories have been used, and have they been applied effectively?
- Does the author present a sound, balanced and well researched argument?
- Who is the author and why are they an authority on the subject (are they?)
- Who is the intended audience?

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Depending on your word count and task, you may want to pick and choose the most relevant from the list above. Identifying arguments in a source is not the same as describing its contents: try to establish what the key message is for each. You might find our guides on constructing arguments on the Skills Hub useful. Your annotation should explain what value the source adds, usually within 150 to 300 words (check your assignment brief). If relevant, discuss how your sources relate to and complement each other.

The examples below explain the sources, considering the main arguments and findings from different perspectives.

> Dillon, P.; Wang, R. and Tearle, P. (2007) Cultural disconnection in virtual education. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 15 (2), pp. 153 to 174.
>
> This study is of a small-scale investigation into the differences in learning behaviour exhibited by members of an intercultural group undertaking an online course in educational enquiry. It is argued that as virtual learning environments are seldom designed to accommodate cultural diversity, there is often a disconnection between the intended and the actual experiences of the participants. The study explores the characteristics of this disconnection. It is suggested that differences in learning behaviour that were found were partly due to the different cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the participants. It is further suggested that virtual learning environments should be designed to take account of the mutual transformation of both learner and environment in educational processes. Emphasis is given to the point that inclusivity depends upon an 'adaptive dynamic' in the virtual learning environment that is essentially social.

This example goes further and evaluates the source in its second paragraph.

> Naik, R. (2016) Academic fears about online learning – and how to allay them [online] *Times Higher Education*. Available from: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/academic-fears-about-online-learning-and-how-allay-them [Accessed: 3rd July 2018]
>
> This article is written by one of the creators of the FutureLearn e-learning platform, who was also the Director of the Open University. It discusses the increase in online courses and argues that technology-enhanced learning and innovation should not restrict personal interaction, but enhance it. Naik discusses the need for profit and the importance of considering value for money in terms of relationships with tutors, student union and support services. He argues that international students are a target market for such online learning as they can continue their lives with their families, avoid the UK Border Agency's restrictions and still receive a 'world-leading' education. A 'democratisation of access' is also suggested as a result of the online trend which may be the only way to meet increasing demand for higher education.

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Naik's article offers a passionate argument hailing the potential of online learning for full degree qualifications. He uses emotive language throughout to reinforce his main points, such as 'transform lives', so it reads like a political manifesto. There are occasional unreferenced statistics, but generally the reader has to take the author's stance at face value. Specific cases to illustrate the claims of iris recognition in exams for example would add value to the cutting-edge technical discussion. Finally, the title of the article claims academics are fearful about online learning, but the piece does not back this up at all. Instead, it merely offers a blanket statement about how they are under a great pressure with increased expectation and reduced budgets.

Each assignment brief may have slightly different requirements for how you respond, so check this before you start reading in depth. Consider the following for each source you look at to help you evaluate its quality and whether or not to include it (not necessarily in this order).

You can remember what to consider using the acronym **VIRTUE**:

Value: What values do the authors hold (e.g. moral, cultural, religious)? Is there evidence of bias?

Importance: How important and relevant are the arguments made in the sources to your topic? Explain why.

Reliability: Are the sources reliable and up to date? Explain how. What is the author's expertise on the subject?

Time: What time frame are you looking at for your research? Think about how quickly things change in your field and what time frame would be appropriate for the topic. If a source falls outside this time frame, does its importance outweigh its age?

Use: How could this source be used in your field? Who is the intended audience?

Evidence: What arguments, theories, research, evidence and other sources do the authors use to justify their own research and argument?

Additional guides on this topic are available on the [Skills Hub](#).

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