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How to Write an Annotated Bibliography

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ABSTRACT

Organizing, summarizing, and critically analyzing research is one of the first steps in the development of a research project. Creating annotated bibliographies is a common practice for students and researchers alike. Although annotated bibliographies are frequently utilized as course assignments, scaffolding exercises for project-based learning, and tasks for research assistants, many students and early researchers are unfamiliar with the process and format of an annotated bibliography. The purpose of this article is to provide undergraduate and graduate students, research assistants, and early career researchers within criminal justice, criminology, and other social sciences an explanation and examples of how to improve their research skills through writing annotated bibliographies.

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Introduction

Researchers rely on scholarly articles to guide the writing process. For most of the process, there are texts that provide guidance and examples for students and researchers to follow. For instance, Laubepin (2013) outlines how to read scholarly articles, Denney and Tewksbury (2013) provide an overview of writing a literature review with instructions for both qualitative and quantitative projects, and Fox and Jennings (2014) outline the structure and process for detailing the methods and results of research findings. Although much has been produced on the importance of literature reviews and methodology, little has been provided on developing annotated bibliographies and their foundational role in developing high-quality research projects. This article outlines the purpose and process of creating annotated bibliographies, which is often the first stage of scholarly research. Furthermore, this work provides a resource for others to use when teaching students and mentoring research assistants throughout the research process.

What is an annotated bibliography?

In research, the project's quality is directly associated with the credibility of the sources used to support the research design, arguments, and findings. An annotated

bibliography, or compilation of the sources (e.g. journal articles and books) an author utilizes when conducting/writing an academic piece about a topic, is an essential first step in the research process since it is both a collection and summary of sources on a particular topic (Engle, 2018; Fitzpatrick & Costley, 2016).

Although bibliographies are included at the end of an academic piece to reference each of the sources used, annotated bibliographies are commonly written during the initial stages of a project. Although the purpose and structure of an annotated bibliography may change depending on the project and the author's intent, annotated bibliographies often serve to summarize, describe, and/or evaluate a source (Ferree & Pfeifer, 2018). In the process, this work establishes a foundation for an extensive and robust literature review and may contribute to a higher-quality end product (e.g. research paper, manuscript).

Generally, there are two types of annotated bibliographies, descriptive or critical (Hicks & Roberts, 2018). While descriptive annotations focus on the original work and describe the purpose, arguments, and conclusions (see [Appendix C](#)), a critical annotation focuses on the analysis of the theoretical framework, and the strengths and limitations of the source (see [Appendix B](#)) (Hicks & Roberts, 2018). Although it is not uncommon for annotations to be entirely descriptive or critical, most writers combine these two approaches (Hicks & Roberts, 2018). In such cases, the descriptive section of the annotation will come first, followed by the critical section (Hicks & Roberts, 2018). Therefore, the annotation will contain an initial summary of the author's credentials, the purpose of the paper/study, the theoretical framework, and the methodology (e.g. sample, methods), followed by a critical discussion of the main conclusions, weaknesses, and strengths of the original work.

Why is it important?

Writing an annotated bibliography is essential for many reasons. First, when preparing for a research project, annotated bibliographies are a valuable tool for collecting and evaluating academic sources (Merkle, 2022). Specifically, the annotation serves as a way for the researcher to critically read the source, identify the main points, and highlight the strengths and weaknesses of their arguments (Merkle, 2022). Moreover, writing an annotated bibliography allows the researcher to assess what has been done on the topic of interest, acknowledge trends, and identify existing gaps in the literature. This process allows the researcher to determine the relevance, accuracy, and quality of the source (Engle, 2018; Ferree & Pfeifer, 2018; King, 2010).

Furthermore, when evaluating and deciding which sources should be used in a project, the annotation functions as a guide for a more robust literature review. As Denney and Tewksbury (2013) explain, a literature review should inform the reader about what is known and what is not yet known about a specific topic. Thus, an extensive annotated bibliography helps the researcher identify what has been discovered and discussed by existing literature because it provides an in-depth overview of the topic and encourages critical thinking.

Finally, annotated bibliographies are also useful to help researchers formulate research questions and determine why their research is relevant (Fitzpatrick & Costley,

2016). It is common for researchers to begin their projects with a general idea of the topic but not the specific direction their study will take (Ferree & Pfeifer, 2018). In this context, by writing an annotated bibliography, researchers can compare and contrast the existing literature and frame their thesis statement and research questions based on what has not yet been studied. The process of writing an annotated bibliography leads to applying various intellectual skills, such as concise exposition and analysis, as well as encouraging students to use the library as a tool in the research process (Engle, 2018; Hicks & Roberts, 2018; King, 2010). Although these are useful skills for researchers, they are particularly essential for graduate students to develop early in their master's and doctoral programs. In many programs and writing courses, annotated bibliographies are assigned as part of the development of a larger paper (Fitzpatrick & Costley, 2016; Merkle, 2022; see [Appendix A](#) for sample assignment). As students read a copious number of books and articles throughout their education, learning to summarize, evaluate, and organize these works will assist with their success in developing research proposals, studying for comprehensive exams, identifying new research questions, and writing theses and dissertations.

What does an annotated bibliography include?

The annotated bibliography can vary from a few sentences to several pages depending on its purpose. However, all annotated bibliographies contain two main elements: the citation and the annotation (Engle, 2018; Hicks & Roberts, 2018). This section will discuss these two elements and provide examples and instructions on properly citing and summarizing scholarly sources.

The citation

The citation is an integral component of an annotated bibliography since it identifies the source being annotated. For this reason, the citation must come before the annotation and contain all the required bibliographic information of each source (e.g. title, author, publisher, date) (Engle, 2018; Hicks & Roberts, 2018). Although the bibliographic information may vary depending on the type of research project (for researcher assistants) or assignment (for students), as well as personal preference and/or journal requirements for primary researchers, the format for most citations will be dictated by the discipline or intended publication (e.g. Chicago, MLA, APA). For criminal justice and criminology, the American Psychological Association (APA) format is the most commonly used style. Therefore, annotated bibliographies in APA format would follow the same rules a researcher would use to format a "references" list (APA, 2020). Annotated bibliographies may contain annotations from a variety of sources, such as academic journal articles, books, websites, and other documents (Engle, 2018; King, 2010). However, it is crucial to select works that provide various perspectives on the topic of interest (Engle, 2018).

In addition, it is important to provide citations for primary sources. A primary source contains the raw and original version of information presented. Although secondary sources (e.g. textbooks, book reviews) can be used to interpret and enhance

the understanding of primary source material, citations in annotated bibliographies should reference the original work (i.e. primary source).

The annotation

The annotation is the second component of an annotated bibliography. The annotation is a summary and/or evaluation that accompanies the citation of each source in an annotated bibliography (Hicks & Roberts, 2018). The annotation is often descriptive, critical, or a combination of both approaches and is typically comprised of several sentences written in paragraph form (Engle, 2018; Hicks & Roberts, 2018).

Annotations should be written in the third person (they, he/she, it) and follow all the rules of academic language, such as grammar, spelling, and punctuation (King, 2010). Generally, it is not required to cite the annotated work throughout the annotation because the source of information is clear (APA, 2020). However, in-text citations are necessary if the student or researcher refers to more than one source within the same annotation (APA, 2020).

Summary

Many annotations function as a simple summary of the theme/scope of the work (e.g. book, article). When this is the case, the student or researcher may use the annotation to summarize the source's main topics, points, and arguments (Fitzpatrick & Costley, 2016; Merkle, 2022). Although the length of this section will reflect the researcher's level of detail and the specifics of their project, it is necessary to follow an outline so that no vital aspects of the study are overlooked. For instance, annotations of empirical studies should contain enough information to provide an overview of the purpose of the study, the methodology, theoretical framework, and findings. However, in some instances, emphasizing the study's limitations and future research may also be particularly relevant to a project. When debating which information should be included in the summary, students and/or researchers should ask themselves if the information is pertinent to their project.

Assessment

Annotations can also be written to assess the usefulness and quality of the source. In this instance, students and/or researchers may ask questions about the source's credibility and reliability to determine its usefulness to their project (Merkle, 2022). Again, while the relevance of the information to be included may vary due to the specific direction of a project, an assessment should contain enough detail to provide a precise evaluation of the study's credibility and reliability. Thus, it is expected that this section will be a critique of the study's methodology, findings, and limitations (see [Appendix B](#)).

Reflection

Depending on the nature of the project, ideas for how future research could build upon the original study and how it applies to the current project can also be incorporated in an annotated bibliography. In this case, the annotation is the result of critical and strategic thinking and briefly explains how the source fits the project and how it

can be integrated into the final paper (Merkle, 2022). The reflection should emphasize the application of the study to the current project and discuss how and why this work is relevant to their proposed research (see [Appendix B](#)).

Difference between an annotated bibliography and a literature review

Purpose

Although annotated bibliographies and literature reviews are similar in that they are both a comprehensive overview of relevant sources about a specific topic (Denney & Tewksbury, 2013), their purpose, structure, and components are different (Buttram et al., 2012). Annotated bibliographies consist of relevant sources and their bibliographic information (i.e. the author, title, publisher), followed by a summary of the work that describes and evaluates the source. Thus, the purpose of an annotated bibliography is to inform the researcher/reader of the relevance, accuracy, and quality of each source (Ferree & Pfeifer, 2018). As a result, annotated bibliographies may contain resources that the researcher later finds irrelevant to the topic or the direction of their research. In contrast, literature reviews have three main purposes: (a) to share the results of previous studies and their relevance to the current study, (b) to report the overall dialog in the literature about a topic, and (c) to establish a framework for the importance of the present study (Denney & Tewksbury, 2013). Therefore, the major difference between an annotated bibliography is the length and substance. Although annotated bibliographies typically consist of a paragraph of information about each *potential* source that could be used in a research study, literature reviews provide an in-depth review and analysis of the most relevant studies.

Structure

The structure of annotated bibliographies and literature reviews is also different, especially regarding the organization of sources. For instance, for an annotated bibliography, the researcher must organize sources separately and alphabetically (following the first letter of the author's last name), and each annotation must be written as a separate paragraph (Buttram et al., 2012). Comparatively, a literature review is composed of multiple paragraphs, with each paragraph incorporating several sources to integrate the existing arguments, theories, and studies about the topic (Buttram et al., 2012). Finally, while annotated bibliographies serve as a summary to evaluate the source's relevance, accuracy, and quality, literature reviews must be directly connected to the thesis statement and research questions, leading the reader from a broad view of the topic to the specific issue that is being studied (Denney & Tewksbury, 2013).

Components

The main difference between the components of a literature review and an annotated bibliography is that while the former must contain an introduction and conclusion, the latter does not (Ferree & Pfeifer, 2018). While each source will only be cited once in an annotated bibliography and summarized in a few sentences or several

paragraphs, a literature review is comprised of many paragraphs in which sources must be repeated as many times as necessary to connect the different ideas and arguments relevant to the research question (Buttram et al., 2012; Denney & Tewksbury, 2013). Finally, in annotated bibliographies, each source must contain the formal and complete citation of the source at the beginning, followed by a brief summary in which no in-text citations are needed, while in literature reviews, the writer must reference the ideas using in-text citations repeatedly.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to provide an overview of annotated bibliographies for students and researchers. Depending on the goals of the project, annotated bibliographies can be descriptive, critical, or a combination of the two approaches. Although the length of annotated bibliographies varies depending on the purpose, they typically range from several sentences to a few paragraphs. An annotated bibliography can be a useful tool when developing writing skills and beginning new projects. Creating an annotated bibliography takes time and practice, but the components listed above are designed to provide guidance to teachers, students, and researchers in the academic writing process.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix A

Annotated bibliography assignment instructions

Purpose: The purpose of this exercise is to portray the information in a journal article without having to download the article and read it in its entirety. This document provides an outline of what is needed to complete an annotated bibliography, including how to identify the pertinent information included within an article and how to put those pieces in the correct order. The goal of an annotated bibliography is to compile this information into a few concise paragraphs. Take as many paragraphs as needed to get all the information down—but remember to be succinct.

Steps and instructions

1. *List the article in APA format*
Example: Bryson, S. L., & Peck, J. H. (2020). Understanding the subgroup complexities of transfer: The impact of juvenile race and gender on waiver decisions. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 18(2), 135–155. doi:10.1177/1541204019869398
2. *State the purpose of the paper:*
 - The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of race and gender on juvenile transfer decisions.

3. *Describe the sample used* (make note of sample size, gender, race/ethnicity, and ages examined):
 - Used judicial waiver-eligible youth data from 2004 to 2014 within one Northeast state ($N = 56,541$).
 - Males, Females, Black, White
 - 14- to 21-year-old
4. *Theoretical framework used*:
 - This study employed an intersectionality perspective (Burgess-Proctor, 2006; Crenshaw, 1991; Guevara et al. 2006; Potter, 2013). This view considers how factors such as race, class, gender, and sexuality are intrinsically tied to prior and current social norms and conflict.
5. *Analyses*:
 - The researchers conducted hierarchical generalized linear modeling (HGLM) analyses to examine how court transfer decisions are influenced by juvenile race and gender. They also controlled for juvenile demographic characteristics and geographic region (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002).
6. *Main Findings*:
 - Findings indicate racial differences. Youth who identified as Black and male were most likely to be judicially waived. White males were the second category likely to be waived, followed by Black females. Finally, White females were the least likely of all race/gender combinations to be waived to adult court.
7. *Strengths*:
 - A strength of the study was the breadth of the data, which addressed prior limitations. The data were derived from 11 years of data in a Northeast state that also had been one of the leaders of the Models for Change (MFC) initiative.
8. *Limitations*:
 - Due to low representation of Hispanic youth within the dataset, the authors were unable to examine the influence of race/ethnicity on judicial waiver decisions. The authors also address the potential for omitted-variable bias, specifically variables accounting for previous court stage information, offense-specific circumstances, the presence of legal representation, or factors of the judicial waiver hearing. The findings may also have reduced generalizability as they contain data from only one state.
9. *Future Research*:
 - This article explains that future studies should examine the simultaneous effects of race and gender and focus on testing juvenile court theoretical perspectives. Additionally, they suggest the utilization of mixed-methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the juvenile transfer decision-making process.
10. *Application*:
 - This study applies to the current project because . . . (similar variables, hypotheses, or research questions; outcomes/discussion support future research; foundational work, etc.)

Appendix B

Critical example (quantitative)

Bryson, S. L., & Peck, J. H. (2020). Understanding the subgroup complexities of transfer: The impact of juvenile race and gender on waiver decisions. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 18(2), 135-155. doi:10.1177/1541204019869398

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of race and gender on juvenile transfer decisions. The authors used judicial waiver-eligible youth data from 2004 to 2014 within one Northeast state ($N = 56,541$). Males, females, Black, and White youth ages 14 to 21 were examined. The authors used the intersectionality perspective to support their arguments.

The researchers conducted hierarchical generalized linear modeling (HGLM) analyses to examine how court transfer decisions are influenced by race/ethnicity and gender. They also controlled for juvenile demographic characteristics and geographic region (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002).

Results indicate racial differences. Youth who identified as Black and male were most likely to be waived judicially. White males were the second category likely to be waived, followed by Black females. Finally, White females were the least likely of all race and gender combinations to be waived to adult court. A strength of the study was the breadth of the data, which addressed prior limitations. The data were derived from 11 years of data in a Northeast state that also had been one of the leaders of the Models for Change (MFC) initiative.

Despite the strengths, there were several limitations of this study. Due to low representation of Hispanic youth within the dataset, the authors were unable to examine the influence of ethnicity on judicial waiver decisions. The authors also address the potential for omitted-variable bias, specifically variables accounting for previous court stage information, offense-specific circumstances, the presence of legal representation, or factors of the judicial waiver hearing. The findings may also have reduced generalizability as they contain data from only one state.

Future research should examine the simultaneous effects of race and gender and focus on testing juvenile court theoretical perspectives. Additionally, the utilization of mixed-methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the juvenile transfer decision-making process.

The application of this article to my proposed research is

Appendix C

Descriptive example (Mixed-Methods)

Schulenberg, J. L. (2010). Patterns in police decision-making with youth: An application of Black's theory of law. *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 53(2), 109–129. doi:10.1007/s10611-009-9210-4

This mixed-methods cross-sectional study tested Black's (1976) Theory of Law in the context of Canadian police decision-making regarding apprehended youth. Specifically, the purpose of this paper was to assess the factors that influence discretion and determine if Black's (1976) theory of laws operate on a continuum. Data were derived from ride-alongs, semi-structured interviews conducted with a representative sample of over 350 police officers across Canada during 2002, and the UCR. Data were analyzed using a mixed-methods approach. For the quantitative data (UCR data and coded interview responses), factorial ANOVAs were used to examine whether the proportion of apprehended youth charged was significantly impacted by the availability of diversionary methods (pre-charge diversion, no pre-charge, post-charge diversion, no post-charge, restorative justice, no restorative), while controlling for community context and police service delivery. The qualitative data (interviews, field notes) were analyzed both inductively and deductively. The researchers tested Black's theory of law while also developing theory grounded in the data. Open, axial, and selective coding under a grounded theory approach were utilized. Results indicate that discretion is impacted by a variety of factors (including urban and suburban locations), as social control weakens, there is an increase in police use of law (penal, compensatory, conciliary, or therapeutic), and the style of law is influenced by parental involvement.