Annotated bibliography for a research journal article

Ross Woods. This version 2025

What is an annotated bibliography?

An annotated bibliography is a a set of notes in preparation for a literature review. For each source, make three kinds of notes:

1. A report of it says
2. Your evaluation
3. Bibliographic details (author's name, title of article, publisher, etc.)

Write an introduction for your annotated bibliography

To write an annotated bibliogrphy, you need to already have a suitable topic. Your readers need to know your purpose and topic, so it is good to stard with a brief introductory paragaph. This will reflect the focus of your work, create some kind of unity, and indicate its boundaries.

Plan your search

Your goal at this stage is to have a full collection of sources in folders. The steps are as follows:

1. Choose the search engines that you will use. They should be specifically for academic sources, mostly journal articles., e.g. Google Scholar or Sinta. ERIC is excellent for education.
2. Make a list of key search words that you can use in a search engine. The search engine can do the work of finding journal articles. Try these suggestions to get ideas for search words:
   a. Use the key words on your topic, your statement of purpose and your research problem.
   b. Use your background reading from when you chose the topic; it should help in identifying relevant search words, topics, and leading writers in the field.

Collect sources and make comments

1. Do searches on key words.
   a. If you notice some writers come up often as leading thinkers on the topic, you might use their names as keywords and make folders for each one.
   b. Other relevant topics might emerge during your search, so add them as keywords . Follow up on new themes that emerge and any apparent gaps in the literature. As you learn more, some of these often unexpectedly become important.
2. For each item you find, first check whether it's relevant:
   a. For journal articles, you only need to read the title to know whether or not to continue reading.
   b. If the title indicates that it is relevant, read the abstract.
   c. If the title indicates that it is relevant, read the findings, which are usually placed near the end.
   d. If the findings indicate that it is relevant, read the whole article carefully.
   e. Check the year of publication. Works older than a few years might not reflect current research, but a few words are so important and relevant that they might still be helpful.
   f. If you find that it is irrelevant at any stage, discontinue that article so that you don't waste time.
3. Write out the full bibliographical entry.
   a. Most journals now have a full reference on the front page of the article, so this task is usually a simple copy and paste. Many journals use other formats than the bibliographical format required by your institution, so you might need to edit them a little to comply with your institution's style guide.

     b. If the article has no issue number and is not dated (which is unusual), you will need a URL (website link) for your Accessed on [date].
Note: Capture that information while you still have the article on screen.

4. Download and save copies of each useful article. (If you don't know whether it will be useful, make a copy, because it might be useful later on.)
5. Write an in-text reference for each bibliographical item and insert it into the annotation. For example, Harvard in-text references often look like this: (Smith, 2017, pp. 21-32.) You can instead use Mandalay or Zotero for references.
6. Write your own comments, such as strengths, unique insights or information, weaknesses, limitations, relevance, and implications.
     a. You might also want to include a summary of the article's main ideas expressed (accurately) in your own words so that you are sure you understand them.
     b. Include any particularly relevant direct quotes, with page numbers. Sometimes it is too difficult to improve on the original author's wording.
     c. Give your critique, but "critique" doesn't always mean "find fault." You will find that some sources are very helpful and you won't find fault with them. In fact, you can more easily build on their work. (Some students think that critique is finding fault with everything.) Just write factually about the source material that you read. You don't have to add an develop our own ideas at this stage.
     d. Make good notes of your comments in whole sentences, so you will understand them later on. (You don't want to go back to them later on and think, "What did I mean by that?") If you make notes on a scrap of paper, put them into your well-organized notes in your word processor document as soon as possible.
     e. Compare the views of authors. What is similar? What is different?
     f. Identify the most important thinkers on your topic and the watershed papers, and comment more heavily on their contribution.
     g. When you have critiqued the ideas in the main sources, you don't always need to do separate critiques of very similar documents that are examples of the same thing. Some sources are adequately represented with a "cf." or "cf. also" reference.
7. Check that you have represented the article accurately and that the comments will make sense to a reader who hasn't read the actual article.
8. Check the bibliographical entry.
9. After each article, move it into the *Done* folder for that search word. (This makes it easy to keep track of what you have already done and what you haven't yet done yet; it's just too easy to lose track if you keep them all in one folder.)

Let it evolve
As you follow leads and find more sources, new themes will probably emerge for you to explore. You might also notice gaps where nothing has been written. This will change the shape of your annotated bibliography.

How long?
Articles in research journals are usually from 6,000-8,000 words, so space is very limited. Many journals set a word limit, so your article will be rejected if it is too long. Allow about 1000 words.

How many sources
Aim for about 15 articles (minimum 10, maximum about 20). Select the most relevant articles.