

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHIES

An annotated bibliography is simply a collection of research citations, each with a paragraph or so of critical comments added. Doing annotated bibliographies is an efficient way to gain a basic understanding of a selection of useful texts. It is also excellent preparation for writing a paper or even making studio work, because it speeds up critical thinking and gives you broad perspective on different writers and their ideas.

THE BASICS

Some annotated bibliographies are summaries of texts, while others may involve specific purposes unique to themselves. But unless otherwise requested, your annotation should try to do four main things:

- identify the origin, purpose, and thesis of the text (“who, what, when, where, why”);
- Provide analytical or critical thinking about how a text does what it does (more on this below);
- Give context for how the text fits into a bigger cultural or academic picture (often this will
- Mean evaluating whether the text is effective in fulfilling its purpose); and
- Assess and communicate the text’s interest or value to your own research.

Note that these elements can vary in order, but it is usually best to start with origin / purpose and move on from there.

EXAMPLES

Here is an example of a brief annotation for a textbook you have likely encountered at OCADU:

Sturken, Maria and Lisa Cartwright. Practices of Looking. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. “This text is an introduction to various cultural theories and how they apply to visual culture. The authors, both of whom are professors at American universities, discuss the visual world from a wide range of different academic perspectives, from semiotics and psychoanalytic theory to Marxism and feminism. While the text contributes no new theories and operates largely as a survey, the authors do clearly identify their own approach as “social constructionism.” That is, they assert that there is no pure, unmediated reality, but that so-called reality is a changing, complex construction of senses, images, concepts, language, power structures, and more. My own thesis project critiques how art is taught in the university, so this book, as a foundational text for many first- and second-year art programs in North America, gives an excellent indication of the theoretical framework students are expected to work within.”

Notice that this annotation contains all the elements of a traditional annotation outlined above (though not necessarily in that order).

It is important to realize that a text does not need to be “academic” in order for us to write an academically acceptable annotation about it. You could write an annotation for a pop culture magazine, political brochure, or even an artwork. Here is an example of an annotation for a book of photographs:

Xenakis, George. Workers. Toronto: Circa Press, 1925.

“This monograph of black and white pinhole photographs contains images of the urban poor in early 20th century Toronto. In all of these photographs, workers are pictured with the objects and tools of their trade (already a well-established portraiture strategy for centuries and particularly apparent in photography of the modern era). The images are an excellent technical example of how the limited technology of the pinhole camera, which I will be using for my work, can produce a variety of effects. But since my work also deals with political representations of urban life, I will be looking specifically at how Xenakis’s scenes use gesture, mise-en-scène, and lighting to construct a message of the struggle and suffering in workers’ lives.”

BRAINSTORMING THE ANNOTATION

As you may notice in the above examples, the kinds of critical or analytical observations one makes about a text can vary. It depends what you consider to be the most important aspects to discuss. Try to identify an angle that is most relevant to your own research and use that angle to help you focus on a few observations.

Before you decide what to include in your annotation, however, you’ll need to take a good hard look at the text itself. You don’t have to read the entire thing (though with short articles it may be best to), but you should observe, analyze, deconstruct.

BELOW ARE SOME QUESTIONS YOU CAN USE TO GET STARTED:

ORIGIN: Who wrote and published the text? Experts, amateurs, academics, politicians? What effect does this have on the character of the text, or on its credibility?

THESIS/PURPOSE: Look at the title, the back cover blurb, the introduction, the section headings.... What is the text trying to do? What is its reason for being? How does it distinguish itself? Who is it written for?

CONTEXT: What body of knowledge is the text discussing or adding to? What field of research or “discourse” is it participating in? How does it relate to other research or writing in that field? Is it challenging the ideas of previous texts? Re-interpreting? Summarizing?

RHETORIC: What language and methods of presentation does this text use? Does it use argument? Does it appeal to the reader logically, using evidence, explaining connections? Perhaps it appeals more emotionally, or by using anecdotes and stories.... What about the tone – Is it serious, angry, sad, humourous, ironic, sarcastic? Perhaps it uses language in many different ways at once.... What effects do these kinds of choices have?

GRAPHICS: Are there images, charts, other graphics? How are these used and how do they relate to the text?

OTHER: What else do you notice about what this text does and how it does it?

Try answering these questions about a text you are reading right now. Once you have some answers, ask yourself how the text would be different if any of the answers to the above questions were different. Would that matter?