Annotated Bibliography: APA Format

Some assignments require students to create annotated bibliographies. These are simply entries in reference list format with descriptive or evaluative comments attached. The APA has no official position on the formatting of such bibliographies, although they do present some examples of annotated entries in the Publication Manual. Unfortunately, the approach the Publication Manual actually uses is significantly different from that specified in other style books. The best approach might be to rely partly on the standard for APA reference citations and partly upon the block quotation format described in the Chicago Manual of Style. This is the approach I have taken, and I have been careful to point out the differences between this method and the actual practice of the APA Publication Manual.

Annotation Content:

Annotations may indicate

1. the authority and qualifications of the author,
2. the subject, scope, theme of the work,
3. biases, omissions, or limitations,
4. the intended audience,
5. special features (graphs, charts, photographs, illustrations, statistics, etc.).

Annotation Style:

The comments vary in length and style.

1. Length of annotations: Most range from 30-150 words; longer or multi-paragraph commentaries may require special formatting (see below).

2. Syntax: Comments may be in the form of complete sentences or fragmentary notes omitting introductory words and phrases, articles, and unnecessary modifiers. Be consistent; use one style throughout the bibliography.

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1In response to my direct questions, they offered the following observations: “the Publication Manual includes annotated bibliographies. . . However, their presence does not constitute a standard or guideline. APA style omits general rules explained in widely available style books and examples of usage with little relevance to the behavioral and social sciences” (APA Style Expert, personal e-mail, October 9, 2002).
Annotation Format:

1. Hanging indents: Hanging indentations are required for reference citations and should be used in the bibliography. The first line of the citation starts at the left margin; subsequent lines are indented one tab stop. The annotation begins on a new line and is indented TWO tab stops. In the case of a multi-paragraph annotation, an additional tab may be required. In its practice, the APA Publication Manual treats annotations as a type of block quotation, so it may be appropriate to apply the rules for multi-paragraph block quotations to long annotations. The APA does not directly discuss such quotations, but it identifies the Chicago Manual of Style as one of the sources for its own chapter on editorial style (p. 77). The 14th edition of the Chicago Manual of Style notes that “A block quotation should reflect the paragraphing of the original” (p. 362). Thus, it may be acceptable to format a long annotation in the style shown below (example 2).

2. Tab settings: the Manual suggests that indentations should be “five to seven spaces or ½ in.” (p. 289), although its own annotated bibliography entries (pp. 368-374) use indents of four, then two spaces. The examples in this document use standard five-space tabs.

3. Line spacing: APA sample entries use double spacing throughout, with no extra lines between entries.

4. Arrangement of entries: use alphabetical ordering (by author) in each section; some annotated bibliographies have separate sections for primary/secondary material or books/articles.

Sample Entry 1 (short annotation):


Well-organized grammar and composition workbook. Includes many useful exercises and examples and good sections on APA, MLA, and CSE formats. Inexpensive and widely available undergraduate text which also makes a useful general reference work.

Notes: The margins have been narrowed artificially to make the levels of indentation clearer. The Publication Manual itself uses special tab settings of 4 spaces for the hanging indent and only 2 spaces for the annotation indent. The second and third words of this book title (Little, Brown) are proper nouns: they are capitalized because they are names and not because they are elements of a book title.
Sample Entry 2 (long annotation):


This standard reference for authors, editors, printers, and academics provides an exhaustive body of information about every detail of manuscripts and published materials. The *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* cites it as a major source for its chapter on editorial style. It has extensive sections on punctuation, formatting, and documentation comprising over 600 pages. Other sections deal with manuscript development, legal considerations, and book production. The work is the oldest standard style guide still in use; the first edition was published in 1906 and it has been under continuous development since.

The size and complexity of the work creates some obstacles. Many sections of the guide set out alternatives rather than strict rules. Although the discussions are comprehensive and reasonable; some students find this variability confusing. The sheer bulk (921 pages) can also discourage; however, the chapter layout and indexing are excellent. The expense and size of the volume make it more of an institutional than a personal reference.

Notes: This long annotation (161 words) consists of two paragraphs, which have additional indentations. Again the margins have been narrowed artificially to make the levels of indentation clearer. Standard five-space (0.5 in.) tab stops have been used throughout.