
WHAT IS AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

KOMMENTIERTE BIBLIOGRAFIE

by Paul Sandringham

Your first major task in this semester will be to produce an annotated bibliography (kommentierte Bibliografie). The name says it all, really: it is a bibliography with annotations! But let's revise briefly what it is, and what it is for, before we look at some examples.

WHAT IT IS

A bibliography is, essentially, a catalogue of texts for a specific subject. It is not the same as a reference list, because it covers more than just the texts we have specifically cited in a project. It should be exhaustive, that is to say, complete. Realistically, we will almost always miss something, and if we are unlucky, that something we miss will be very important. If we are really unlucky, our readers will know just what we missed and happily point it out. But that doesn't make the rest of our work a waste of time, nor is it a reason not to try to be complete.

The word "exhaustive" is useful here. It means we have "drained the pond". There is nothing left. We have covered it all. And yes, achieving that is also *exhausting*!

Of course, we can't find everything ever written about a particular field. There are some criteria that always apply, and then other criteria that we can identify and choose for ourselves to further refine the scope.

GENERAL CRITERIA FOR MATERIAL

- We are only interested in scholarly material. News articles are of no value. Original source data are of no value. Popular literature is of no value. We want items from scholarly journals, books or book chapters, and scholarly conference proceedings.
- Bearing in mind the level at which we are working, we do not need basic or common knowledge. For a bibliography related to the latest developments in the study of algorithms, for example, we would probably not need to include texts providing simple definitions of algorithms or finite state machines. We are looking for work representing scholarly development at our own academic level, a little lower, or somewhat higher. The latest cutting-edge research *may* be out of range, although it is never a problem to include it. It is, however, a problem to include things that are too basic: they insult our readers and waste our own time.
- At least in engineering and scientific disciplines, and to a great extent also in the humanities and arts, we are not interested in older work. This varies, of course, according to the purpose of our bibliography, but unless you are producing a complete study of a subject from A to Z, you are interested only in recent research, as anything else is essentially "common knowledge" in the field (see above).

VARIABLE CRITERIA FOR MATERIAL

- We may choose to refine our material to a very specific aspect of our field, or only to theoretical research or only to practical applications in a specific industry.
- We may choose to define the timeframe for material very specifically, rather than just "recent research".
- We may, for a legitimate scholarly purpose, limit ourselves to material coming from a specific geographical region. Alternatively, for the purpose of this assignment, you may choose to restrict yourself to items published in a single language. Normally, however, this is not acceptable for academic research – and it is **not** an approach you should take in your Projektarbeit.

The notes above cover the *bibliography*. What about the *annotations*?

Essentially, with an annotated bibliography, we are providing a summary of current research and knowledge in our chosen area. The annotations consist of a summary of each item:

- The topic
- The new knowledge included, e.g. conclusions
- The argumentation or methodology taken to reach these conclusions
- Optionally, other researchers whose work is also referred to or used as the basis for this work
- Optionally, your opinion on (a) the credibility of the conclusions – are you convinced? and (b) the approach taken – is it easy to follow and understand, perhaps even worthy of emulation?

You can only produce such an annotation by reading and understanding the material. Just reading the introduction and conclusion will not be enough. You will need to read thoroughly and understand.

Ideally, the annotations at this level will consist of one paragraph per item. Three or four sentences are a good target for each item. It should be enough so that you can later refer to it and find your knowledge of the article refreshed, so that you know whether to go back to it for details in your own research. It should also be enough so that another reader can use this to choose articles that may or may not be of interest.

PURPOSE

In this semester, the first purpose for you of your annotated bibliography will be to pass the subject! But actually, it can and should have a deeper purpose for you, even in this semester.

When we think back to the key guiding principles of scholarly work, we have four things that we want to achieve in relation to the existing body of knowledge in our chosen field:

- i. identify/recognise the body of knowledge
- ii. understand the body of knowledge
- iii. apply the body of knowledge
- iv. extend the body of knowledge

As we discussed, point iv (extending the body of knowledge) is not something we directly aim to achieve at this level, but it is fair to say that the new application of existing knowledge is also a form of extending knowledge. So our goal, at this point, is all about interaction with knowledge that already exists. The annotated bibliography helps us with all four sub-goals, and also demonstrates that we are achieving at least the first two sub-goals. How?

In choosing the material for our annotated bibliography, we must find what is currently known and being said about our field. The *bibliography* aspect is a direct instance of identifying and recognising the body of knowledge.

To summarise and/or evaluate this material, we have to understand it. The *annotated* aspect is a direct instance of understanding the body of knowledge.

Only when we have recognised and understood what is known and/or thought about our field can we synthesise that knowledge and find a way to apply it – the third sub-goal, which is, essentially, what the academic part of your Projektarbeit is all about. And so the production of an annotated bibliography is not only a useful exercise in developing your skills as a scholar; it can also, potentially, provide a partial foundation for your Projektarbeit, if the subject you choose now is in any way related to your PA.

EXERCISE

Your exercise for the rest of this lesson is very simple: attached for this class are four examples of very different annotated bibliographies in different disciplines. Read them – not necessarily every single entry, though, as they are extensive and, in some cases, very longwinded. I have deliberately chosen four very different examples. Make notes for yourself about how the annotations are put together, how the lists are put together, etc. What do you find effective and useful as a reader, and what do you find distracting? Look at how other people have done this and make some decisions about what you think makes a good annotated bibliography. If you find some other useful examples online, feel free to post them on Moodle for your colleagues to look at, but make sure you clearly acknowledge where you found them, and let me know that you have posted them, so that I can have a look and make sure that they really do satisfy the quality expectations we have.

These notes do not need to be submitted, but you may choose to do so if you want my feedback. They are for you – but that does not make them less important. In fact, it makes them more important, because they are your key to mastering this vital tool in your scholarly toolkit.

Please note that your own bibliography will be limited to 10 to 15 articles and will not need to break things down into separate categories as these examples do. Defining the field and choosing the articles is the subject of our next lesson.