Activity 10.1: Writing a synthesis

For this activity we advise that you choose carefully the passages you will synthesise – make sure there are strong connections between the ideas in the passages, so that you can create a coherent synthesis.

As an individual or with another student

Collect three passages of about 300 words each on a particular topic and write a 300-word synthesis of the ideas in these passages. Ensure that your own argument shapes the synthesis, and include all necessary in-text citations (see Chapter 5).

THE ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

As we explained on page 54, a bibliography is a list of resources or texts (books, articles, audiovisual materials, websites and so on) on a topic, set out according to the rules of a particular referencing system. It is almost always organised in alphabetical order so that it is easy to find items on the list. In an annotated bibliography, a brief comment – or annotation – is added after each item. The comment generally describes the content of the item, and may include an evaluation of its worth for particular readers.

You can best understand how an annotated bibliography works if you think about the familiar concepts of audience and purpose. An annotated bibliography is written for particular readers on a topic that relates specifically to them. It generally has several purposes:

- to inform them about the resources that exist on the topic, and what content each one covers
- to suggest the most appropriate resources for different subgroups within the audience (e.g. experts on the topic, students of the topic, beginners in the area, people interested in a particular aspect of the topic)
- to recommend which resources are most valuable to particular readers, and explain why.

In previous decades, annotated bibliographies were usually written by academics for people who wanted to study a subject formally. Now many non-academic people place annotated bibliographies on the Internet – people with an interest in a particular topic, who want to share this interest with others. If you enter the phrase ‘annotated bibliography’ in a search engine, you will find thousands of annotated bibliographies on an amazing range of topics from ‘avian collision and electrocution’ to ‘Zoroastrian studies’.

The bibliography and the list of references

See pages 53–4 to remind yourself about the differences between a bibliography and a list of references.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHIES AT UNIVERSITY

At university, you generally write for your lecturer alone, and sometimes for your fellow students, with purposes such as to:

- demonstrate your skills in researching by applying them to a particular subject
- demonstrate your skills in understanding and evaluating texts (see Chapter 4)
- demonstrate your skills in reading a range of texts quickly to gain a sense of what is available on a subject (see the section on Reading skills, beginning on page 13, if you need help to develop these skills)
- become familiar with the range of texts available on a subject
- inform other students of useful resources on a subject
- set the groundwork for a further written or oral assignment by collecting and evaluating the texts you will use.

You will generally be permitted to include in your annotated bibliography texts that you consider unreliable, badly expressed or inappropriate for an academic context, provided that you explain your concerns in your annotation. Check with your lecturer that this is acceptable before you do this, however,
The annotation, the summary and the synthesis

In writing an annotation you take a step back from a text and describe what it is about, what it deals with, what it concerns, what subject it covers and so on. You also comment on its reliability, relevance and quality as a text. In an annotation, therefore, you are examining the text as a construction.

This is different from writing a summary or a synthesis (see above), where you remain inside the text or group of texts, and rewrite their key ideas in your own words. In a summary or synthesis, therefore, you are engaging with the ideas of a text, not looking at the text from the outside.

THE ANNOTATION

Traditionally, an annotation is any note that you add to a text, often in the margins, making a comment or adding a question or explanation. In the context of the annotated bibliography, however, an annotation is a separate paragraph added after each end-of-text reference.

The length of an annotation varies enormously from one bibliography to another – each one can be as short as one sentence or as long as several hundred words. Short annotations generally focus on just the content of each text; in longer ones the writer might consider a range of questions:

- What main subject areas are covered in the text?
- What arguments or contentions does the author present? What are the author’s attitudes to or perspectives on the issue?
- What types of material are included (e.g. statistics, graphics, case studies, bibliography)?
- Who is it written for (e.g. what age, educational background, experience on the subject)? How useful is this information for this audience?
- How reliable do you feel the information is? (Refer to pages 41–3 for more details on assessing reliability.)
- Is the author an authority on the subject?
- What research methodologies has the author used? Do you feel that these are valid and appropriate?
- What is the writer’s response to the text (ideas, language, format and so on)?

Incorporating response comments

Most writers of annotations incorporate their personal responses to a text within their discussion of content, relevance and reliability, rather than writing complete sentences of personal response. For example: 'This inspiring/insightful/important/entertaining/thoroughly researched article describes how nanotechnology will revolutionise medical procedures in the twenty-first century.'

PREPARING TO WRITE AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Start by browsing through published annotated bibliographies. You will find them in your university library by typing ‘annotated bibliography’ and a general subject into a keywords search on your library catalogue. Experiment with your terms until you find successful ones – for example, ‘annotated bibliography’ and ‘environment’ is likely to give you results, while ‘annotated bibliography’ and ‘global warming’ may be too specific. On the Internet, you will find them by typing ‘annotated bibliography’ and any subject into a search engine.

Skim-read a range of these texts, both printed and online. Think about the audience, purpose and context of each one, and how these aspects affect the final product. Notice the:

- vocabulary they use
- types of idea included
• content and amount of detail in the annotations
• format of the complete text
• way the bibliographic references and the annotations are set out.

DETAIL IN AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY
As we mentioned above, annotations can range from one sentence to several hundred words. Your
lecturer will set the word limit required, and this will control the amount of detail you include. If you are
writing very short annotations you might limit yourself to a:
• brief description of the content
• description of the author
• statement about what type of audience the text is aimed at
• phrase or two to indicate your response to the text, incorporated within your other sentences.
So a 50-word annotation might look something like Figure 10.6.

This fascinating and well-researched article explains how attitudes to sustainable architecture developed in the last half of the twentieth century in Australia. It was written by an academic who has been working in the area for more than twenty years, and is both accessible and challenging to undergraduate students.

Figure 10.6 A short annotation

This journal article argues that internet users should better prepare and protect themselves (and their computers) so that they can enjoy a safer online experience. Online security fraud, for example, is not uncommon, and is merely one of the risks involved with using the internet. That is why ‘The great American privacy makeover’ also argues that internet users need to be aware of the dangers they face online.

The article supports its arguments by informing the reader of the different ways that fraud and other security breaches are carried out. It provides real-life examples of people who were in different situations, and broadly examines what happened, and what could have been done. Various methods of protection are recommended, and links to helpful internet sites and software are presented.

Of particular relevance is that the article suggests improvements in how computer users protect themselves. An outcome of my research topic is to make similar recommendations, and so this article will be of great assistance in composing my written assignment and achieving that outcome.

Figure 10.7 A more detailed annotation

You will have noticed that in the last paragraph Lay refers to his ‘written assignment’. This annotation is from an annotated bibliography he wrote to prepare him to write a major report on the same subject,
so he has been asked to consider the relevance of each text for his next assignment. If you are asked to write an annotated bibliography to prepare for another assignment, it is very important to shape your annotations to your specific purposes in the second assignment.

THE LANGUAGE OF AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Lay’s annotation is a very useful model for you because, while his language is formal, it is also very clear and concise. He doesn’t fall into the trap of using over-flowery, convoluted language in order to try to sound more academic. If you want to explore this issue further, look at Chapter 11, where we offer tips for writing in clear, concise but formal language.

Use formal language

Be careful when you examine the language of annotated bibliographies published on the Internet — remember that they may be written in a much more informal register than is acceptable in university assignments. Notice those that are written in formal register or language (generally those written by academics for their colleagues or students), and use them as the model for your register.

Our students generally pitch their vocabulary at an appropriately formal level in annotated bibliographies, but often make the mistake of writing in incomplete sentences. Don’t write phrases like these ones, which we see regularly from our students:

- ‘An entertaining article written by an authority on the subject.’ (Not a sentence.)
- ‘A really good read.’ (Not a sentence and not formal enough language for a university assignment.)

To help you write annotations in clear, concise and appropriately formal language, here are some words and phrases to describe the content of a text.

- This text ...
  - argues that ...
  - examines ...
  - explores ...
  - discusses ...
  - considers ...
  - covers the issue of ...
  - focuses on ...
  - treats the topic of ...
  - concentrates on ...
  - is an introduction to ...
  - begins with ...
  - concludes with ...

We’re sure you can think of many more phrases like these. You’ll find a much longer list on page 62. But a word of warning – make sure you understand what each word or phrase suggests before you use it. The words in the list on page 62, in particular, have different nuances of meaning that will affect the way you use them in your sentences.

Table 10.1 below lists some words and phrases for describing your response to a text. Remember that you don’t need to devote separate sentences solely to your response. You can incorporate this response in sentences describing content or any other aspect of the text. For example, you might write something like: ‘This well-documented and influential article argues that developing nuclear energy is the best solution to the global warming problem.’ In this way you would express your overall response to the text while outlining its content.