

Guide to Writing a Critical Bibliography

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1. Definition:

A **critical bibliography** (also called an **annotated bibliography**)

- is a set of individual entries, generally of a page or less. Each entry identifies, briefly summarizes, and critically evaluates a study, article, or book.
- has an overall introduction to state the scope of your coverage and formulate the question, problem, or concept your chosen material illuminates.
- has an overall conclusion to sum up your conclusions about your chosen material.

2. Purpose:

The purpose of a critical bibliography is to provide the reader with the following information about a set of studies, articles, or books:

- The **full bibliographic information** in proper APA reference style (unless another style is asked for)
- A **summary** of the contents. In the case of a primary research study, the reader wants to know:
 - o the purpose
 - o type of study
 - o methodology
 - o results
- **critical evaluation** of the strengths, weaknesses, usefulness, and implications of the material for a specified enquiry or field or course of study.

3. Characteristics:

An entry in a critical bibliography must be

- precise
- self-contained, and
- informative

A critical bibliography is primarily a test of your critical appraisal skills: can you analyze the **central concepts and arguments** of the material, as well as **summarize its content**,

and provide a **concise evaluation** of its relevance and usefulness? Readers who have no prior knowledge of the material must come away from your review with a clear sense of the **contents** and **relevance** of the article or book you've examined on their behalf.

4. Identifying Perspective and Bias:

There is no such thing as a totally objective writer. Everyone who writes has a particular angle from which they approach their topic. Perhaps it's

- a particular theoretical **framework** or model (e.g., a feminist model applied to issues of gender inequity in medical research), or
- a rhetorical **purpose** (e.g., a desire to persuade members of the general public to improve their health behaviours), or
- a practical perspective based on **professional experience** (e.g., the belief that one approach to pain management is more effective than another), or
- a **bias** that negatively affects your evaluation of the material (e.g., if the writer believes the world is flat, can you trust her description of the solar system?).

As you write, you will need to be conscious of at least two **frames of reference**:

1. the framework and perspective of the **author** of the book or article. In the case of an edited book, there is another level: the framework and perspective of the book's editor
2. **your own** framework and perspective, your reason for writing the critical bibliography

5. Questions to Ask About:

Fundamentals

- who is the audience this book or paper is written for?
- what are the issues being addressed? Are they clearly formulated? Is the significance (scope, severity, relevance) discussed?
- what and how useful is the organization of the material?
- is the material well or poorly written?
- what is the author's perspective or bias?
- what is the author's research perspective?
- what is the author's theoretical framework? (e.g., psychoanalytic, cognitive-behavioral, feminist)
- what is the relationship between the theoretical and research frameworks?

Methodology

- how does the rhetoric/language address the particular audience of the book or article?
- what are the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments?
- what kinds of evidence are used to support the arguments, and how is evidence used? Are there alternative ways of arguing from the same material?
- how would you counter or support the arguments?

- in quantitative and qualitative research studies, how good is the fit between the research design and the conceptualization of the problem? between the hypothesis and the conclusions? what are the strengths and weaknesses of the study design (classic considerations of population, intervention, and outcome)?

Application

- what is the most effective application of the material?
- what further issues are raised as a result of the book or article?
- how does the book or article relate to the overall concerns of your course or field or research question?
- in what ways is the material useful for the theory or practice of your field?