

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING A BIBLIOGRAPHIC ESSAY FOR THE M.A. DEGREE

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What is a Bibliographic Essay?

A bibliographic essay is an analysis of some well-defined literature. The end product, when placed in the hands of someone unfamiliar with that literature, should move them quickly to an understanding of its extent, history, general contents, and major controversies and/or methodologies. It is NOT simply a summary of each article and book, but instead an ANALYSIS that breaks down the literature into meaningful sub-groupings, lays out the issues that divide the literature into these sub-groupings, informs the reader about the general content of the major works with respect to these issues, and provides that reader with a very good sense of which books or articles she or he should read depending on their project or questions. In sum, a bibliographical essay is a research tool developed by its author for possible use by others interested in that topic, and helps its future readers to move quickly to a basic understanding of the literature analyzed. In certain respects it approximates a dissertation literature review. At the end of the analysis there should be an annotated bibliography that provides citations for all of the books and articles discussed, as well as for others that belong to the literature but were not discussed at length. "Annotated" means that each entry in the bibliography at the end of the analytic essay should have a one or two sentence description of the book or article that provides a general description or statement of its significance. For example: "This is the book that first defined the sub-field under investigation. Although now superseded both in its conclusions and in its methodology, the author's characterization of the problem, and the general set of solutions, still defines the enterprise and guides current investigators." Or: "The literature on the topic of _____ tends generally to be analytic and not empirical in a strict sense, but this book by _____ is the first attempt to apply contemporary statistical techniques to determine whether the realist school is correct, or the idealist school. Because the results here support the realist school, the book falls into category B in the foregoing analysis." NOTE: These are examples of annotation in the bibliography at the end, not examples of analysis within the paper itself. The paper should contain more developed and integrated discussion than the kinds of snapshots that are found in an annotation.

How Long Should It Be?

There is no magic number of pages, but anything under twenty-five pages is clearly too short; and anything over forty pages is too long and reflects inefficient writing. As a general rule of thumb, aim for thirty to thirty-five pages--not counting the annotated bibliography at the end.

How Many Books Should It Cover?

The answer to this question is related to that of the last question. There should be enough books and articles to generate a thirty to thirty-five page analysis, but not so many that there is not enough room in these pages to be informative and reasonably complete. As a rough rule of thumb, experience shows that a bibliography with twenty-five to fifty items is about right. The more books there are, the shorter the bibliography will be; whereas the more articles, the longer it will be. So, for example, twenty-five books and no articles will do, but twenty-five articles will not. Twelve books and twenty-five articles is also reasonable. Although bibliographic essays on a literature composed entirely of articles are to be avoided, such an essay would probably need to cover around fifty articles. Obviously, this constitutes too many items to discuss anything meaningfully in the normal number of pages. A good overall number is about twenty-five to thirty-five items--twenty-five if they are all books.

Do All of the Books Need to Be Discussed?

No, at least not at great length. Obviously some of the books are more important and/or complicated than others, and they will be discussed at greater length and compared with more books than others in the bibliography. However, once the categories for discussion, or sub-groupings, have been determined, every book should be at least placed in the category to which you think it belongs with some reasons given for why you think it belongs there.

How Do I Start?

The key to the essay is defining a topic that generates the right number of books. While the bibliography does not need to be absolutely exhaustive, it should basically discuss all of the major items in the relevant literature. Your advisor can help you to define a topic that seems to have the right "span," but in the end, as you compile the bibliography you will need to expand or contract the topic so as to alter the size of the relevant literature. **IT IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO GENERATE THE BIBLIOGRAPHY, NOT YOUR ADVISOR'S**, just as it is your responsibility to provisionally adjust the span of the topic to generate the proper size bibliography--although your advisor will need to approve the final version. Since this is an exercise in independent research and writing, do not expect your advisor to do much more than examine and approve or not approve the bibliographic essay at key check points. Typically, after the advisor has helped to narrow the topic, the student does not consult the advisor again until the bibliography is complete, and the topic that generated that bibliography has been clarified by the student. Then, the student should check in when there is a complete rough draft, including annotated bibliography. Then, the final corrected version can be handed in when ready.

One good idea, once the topic has been determined, is to consult two or three of the most recent publications on the topic to help identify the contributors to the literature. However, this almost always fails to provide all that is needed, so a careful library search is also in order.

What is an example of a good topic? This is very difficult to say beforehand since part of the exercise is for the student to examine the possibly relevant literature and determine that for himself or herself. However, the following might provide some ideas.

Example 1:

- The literature on American voting behavior--too broad
- The literature on voting behavior in the American states--better, but still too broad
- The literature on the impact of religion on American voting behavior--a good possibility
- The literature on the impact of Catholicism on American voting behavior--probably too narrow

Example 2:

- The literature on German politics --too broad
- The literature on Franco-German relations--still too broad
- The literature on political parties in Germany--better, but probably still too broad
- The literature on anti-party attitudes--may be o.k., may be too narrow, check it out

Example 3:

- The literature written by Robert Dahl over his career--just about right
- The literature written by Irving Cowfsnowfski--too narrow, because he wrote too little
- The literature that responds to and/ or analyzes Dahl's work--too broad, too many works

In many instances not all of the literature needs comprehensive discussion. For example, a topic may have forty books on it written since 1900, but you actually discuss only the most recent twenty books, plus the first one that defined the topic, and maybe two or three others that were important in later developments leading to the current literature. This leaves about fifteen books that will be in your annotated bibliography at the end, but which are not really discussed. In their case, the annotation will have to suffice to place them, which means they should have a somewhat longer annotation.

What Kinds of Things Should Be In the Actual Essay?

These are the kinds of questions that make professors' souls weary, but let's at least say something. There are probably several natural sections to the essay. The first, the introduction, provides a coherent, concise definition of the topic or problem that the literature under review addresses; and it also explains the importance or significance of the topic and its literature. The second part should lay out the general analytic categories that emerged upon a comprehensive reading of the literature defined by the topic. This is where the student must be independently ANALYTIC. Such categories as: pro- and anti- something won't cut much ice. Experience shows that a useful categorization scheme usually has four to six major categories that have meaningful distinctions separating them that can be clearly defined. This second part of the essay may make mention of a few exemplars, but it basically lays out an analytic scheme for use in the later sections. An alternative method to use in this second section is to provide a quick history of the literature's development as a way of laying out the way in which categories naturally emerged over time, as well as to identify the major contributors. Then there follows a section that discusses the books in each category by clearly and succinctly explaining why they belong in a given category, provides a general sense of how each book proceeds (including, if relevant, its methodology), compares the books within a category to each other with respect to similarities and differences, and discusses unique aspects of the book which might make it relate in some way to books in another category. It is inevitable that there be some summary of each book's contents, but be careful not to lapse into simple summary that excludes analysis and comparison. On average, there will be six to eight books discussed at length in each category (some books will be prominent in more than one category--for comparison sake, if nothing else). Finally, there should be some overall assessment of the literature--what are its strengths and weaknesses, where should it go next, who seems to have the best handle on the issues central to the literature?

The preceding discussion is based on experience in advising twenty-two bibliographic essays. These are guidelines, not rules, and can be modified by individual members of the faculty. It rests, therefore, on extensive experience, not college rules, and should be considered suggestive, hopefully helpful, but not determinative.