Reference List or Bibliography: What’s the Difference?

by Jeff Hume-Pratuch, APA Style Blog, March 13, 2014

Did you know that there’s no such thing as a bibliography in APA Style? It’s a fact! APA Style uses text citations and a reference list, rather than footnotes and a bibliography, to document sources.

A reference list and a bibliography look a lot alike: They’re both composed of entries arranged alphabetically by author, for example, and they include the same basic information. The difference lies not so much in how they look as in what they contain.

A bibliography usually contains all the works cited in a paper, but it may also include other works that the author consulted, even if they are not mentioned in the text. Some bibliographies contain only the sources that the author feels are most significant or useful to readers.

In APA Style, however, each reference cited in text must appear in the reference list, and each entry in the reference list must be cited in text. If you cite only three sources in your paper, your reference list will be very short—even if you had to read 50 sources to find those three gems! (Hopefully, that hard work will pay off on your next assignment.)

The APA Style Experts are often asked to provide the “official APA-approved format” for annotated bibliographies (i.e., bibliographies that contain the author’s comments on each source). As you may have guessed, there isn’t one; APA Style doesn’t use bibliographies of any sort. In addition, though, the reference list in APA Style contains only the information that is necessary to help the reader uniquely identify and access each source. That’s why there is no format for an annotated bibliography in the Publication Manual.