

Strategies for Writing Literature Reviews

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Graduate Writing Center

- All types of writing
- All stages of the writing process
- One-on-one consultations (50 min)
- Hours posted Fridays at 4pm
- See website for scheduling information

Goals of the Workshop

- To understand the purpose and characteristics of an effective literature review using the concept of the “scholarly/academic conversation.”
- To develop strategies (steps) for inventing, organizing, and drafting a literature review (or a write-up that enacts that function).
- To help you critically assess research materials.

What is a Lit Review?

Purpose of a Literature Review

The literature review is a critical look at the existing research that is significant to the work that you are carrying out. It does several important things...

- Provides background information on the topic
- Establishes importance of topic to scholarship
- Demonstrates your knowledge of the scholarly conversation
- “Carves out a space” for your research

Audience

LR for yourself vs. for publication

Stage of Writing Process

LR as invention vs. rhetorical performance

Size

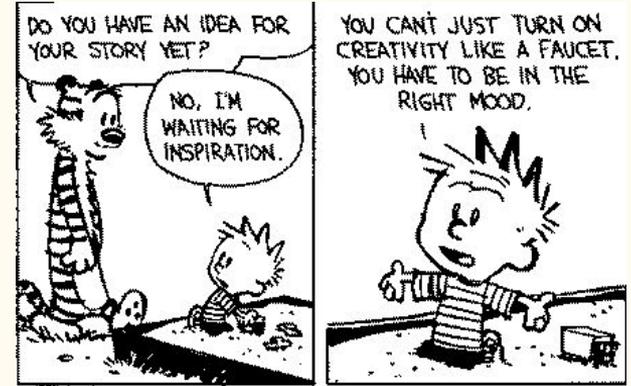
LR as stand-alone essay vs. as preliminary in larger
essay

Characteristics of Effective Literature Reviews

- Outlines important research trends in the conversation
- Assesses the strengths and weaknesses of existing research
- Identifies potential gaps in knowledge
- Establishes a need for current and/or future research projects

Steps in Writing a Lit Review

1. Planning
2. Reading and Research
3. Analyzing
4. Finding the Big Picture
5. Organizing
6. Drafting
7. Revising



Planning

Step 1

What kind of
literature
review am I
writing?

Planning

- Focus
- Type
- Scope
- Academic discipline

Exercise:

In page 3 of your packet, respond to the questions under “Planning a Literature Review.”

Reading & Researching

Step 2

What materials
do I need to
gather?

Reading and Researching

1. Collect and read
2. Summarize and analyze
3. Organize annotated bib
4. Select only relevant books and articles



Analyzing

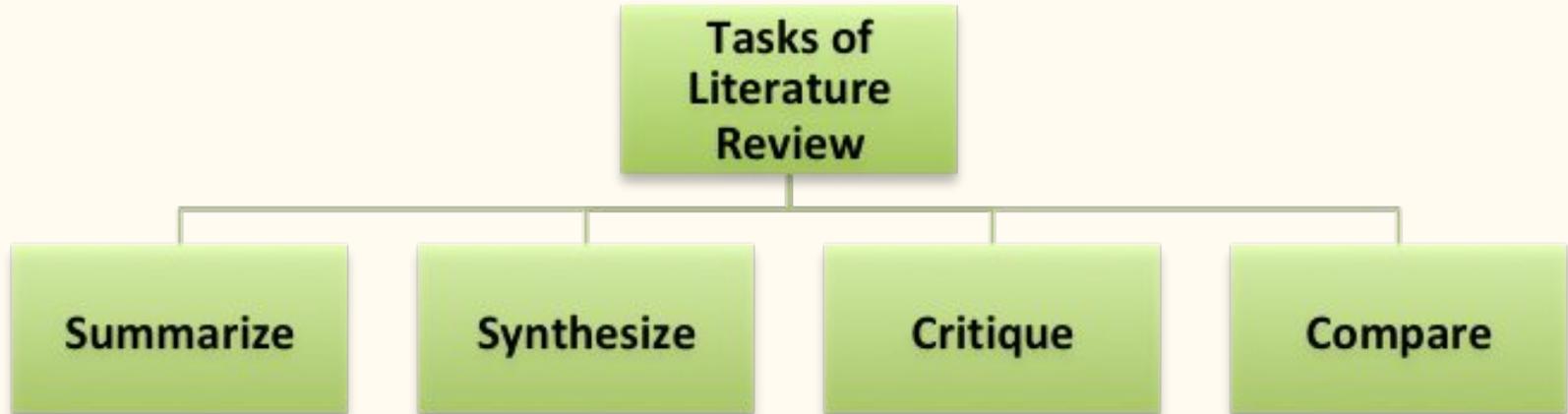
Step 3

How do I
assess existing
research?

Analyzing Sources

- Lit review = argument
- Analysis occurs on two levels:
 - Individual sources
 - Body of research

Four Analysis Tasks of the Literature Review



Summary and Synthesis

- What do we know about the immediate area?
- What are the key arguments, key characteristics, key concepts or key figures?
- What are the existing debates/theories?
- What common methodologies are used?

Sample Language for Summary and Synthesis

- Normadin has demonstrated...
- Early work by Hausman, Schwarz, and Graves was concerned with...
- Elsayed and Stern compared algorithms for handling...
- Additional work by Karasawa et. al, Azadivar, and Parry et. al deals with...

Comparison and Critique

- How do the different studies relate? What is new, different, or controversial?
- What views need further testing?
- What evidence is lacking, inconclusive, contradicting, or too limited?
- What research designs or methods seem unsatisfactory?

Sample Language for Comparison and Critique

- In this ambitious but flawed study, Jones and Wang...
- These general results, reflecting the stochastic nature of the flow of goods, are similar to those reported by Rosenblatt and Roll...

Finding the Big Picture

Step 4

How Do I Put
All This
Together?

Putting It All Together

Do these studies...

- demonstrate topic's chronological development?
- show different approaches to the problem?
- show an ongoing debate?
- center on a "seminal" study or studies?
- demonstrate a "paradigm shift"?

Putting It All Together

- What do researchers KNOW about this field?
- What do researchers NOT KNOW?
- Why should we (further) study this topic?
- What will my study contribute?

Exercise: Evaluating a Review

Complete the
exercise on
pages 6-7 of
the packet.

Organizing

Step 5

Five approaches:

1. Topical
 2. Distant to close
 3. Debate
 4. Chronological
 5. Seminal Study
-

Topical: Characteristics

- Most common approach
- Breaks the field into a number of subfields, subject areas, or approaches
- Discusses each subsection individually, sometimes with critiques of each
- Most useful for organizing a large body of literature without clear narrative arc

Topical: Typical Language

- Three important areas of this field have received attention: A, B, C.
- A has been approached from two perspectives F and G.
- The most important developments in terms of B have been...
- C has also been an important area of study in this field.

Distant to Close: Characteristics

- A type of topical organization, with studies grouped by their relevance to current research.
- Starts by describing studies with general similarities to current research and ends with studies most relevant to the specific topic.
- Most useful for studies of methods or models.

Distant to Close: Typical Language

- Method/Model M (slightly similar to current research) addresses ...
- Drawing upon method/model N (more similar to current research) can help ...
- This study applies the procedure used in method/model O (most similar to current research) to ...

Debate: Characteristics

- Another type of topical approach, with a chronological component.
- Emphasizes various strands of research in which proponents of various models openly criticize one another.
- Most useful when clear opposing positions are present in the literature.

Debate: Typical Language

- There have been two (three, four, etc.) distinct approaches this problem.
- The first model posits...
- The second model argues that the first model is wrong for three reasons. Instead, the second model claims...

Chronological: Characteristics

- Lists studies in terms of chronological development
- Useful when the field displays clear development over a period of time
 - Linear progression
 - Paradigm shift

Chronological: Typical Language

- This subject was first studied by X, who argued/found...
- In (date), Y modified/extended/contradicted X's work by...
- Today, research by Z represents the current state of the field.

Influential Study

- Begins with detailed description of extremely important study.
- Later work is organized using another pattern.
- Most useful when one study is clearly most important or central in laying the groundwork for future research.

Influential Study

- The most important research on this topic was the study by X in (date).
- Following X's study, research fell into two camps (extended X's work, etc.)

The following facts are taken from the literature review section of a published article about the length of time it takes students to write and revise literature reviews. Pretend that these are your own notes on relevant sources. Using one or more of the organizational strategies we have discussed (pg. 8-9), arrange, summarize, synthesize, compare, and/or critique the evidence below to form a meaningful narrative. Make sure you provide framing sentences and transitions to remind your reader what your main points are and to walk them through your narrative.

Exercise

- Now, compare your narratives to the original narratives and answer the following questions with your group. What is different about your narratives? What is the same? What is more effective? Less effective? Is there anything you would change about your narrative after having read these? Is there anything you would change about these narratives after having written your own?

Drafting

Step 6

What am I going
to write?

Drafting: An Overview

- Thesis statement
- Introduction and conclusion
 - Exigency
 - Organization
- Citations

Thesis Statements

An argument about the literature that may:

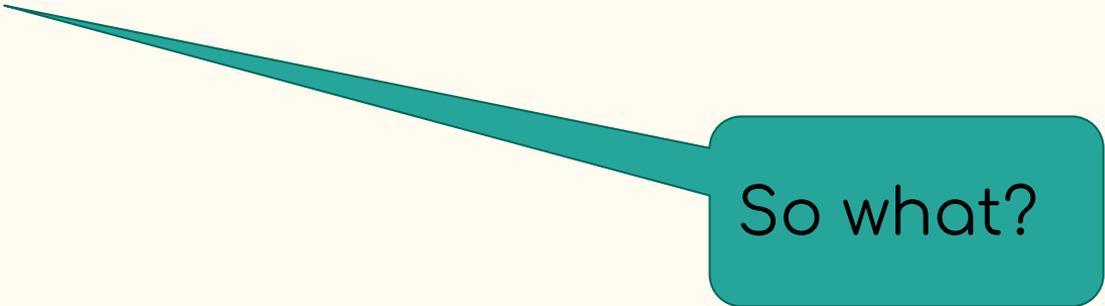
- critically assess literature (i.e., topic + claim)
- overview current scholarly conversations
- point out gaps or weaknesses in literature
- relate literature to larger aim of study

Introduction

- Indicate scope
- Provide some background to topic
- Demonstrate exigency
- Make claim (thesis)
- Offer map of ensuing discussion

Conclusion

- Summarize main findings of lit review
- Provide closure
- Explain “so what?”
- State implications for future research or your study



So what?

Citations

Book Report

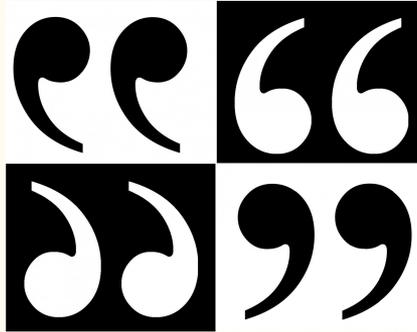
- a string of linked quotes or paraphrases
- reliance on the author's words or ideas

Literature Review

- *synthesizes* your summary of a source's ideas with your own opinions
- comments on the source material

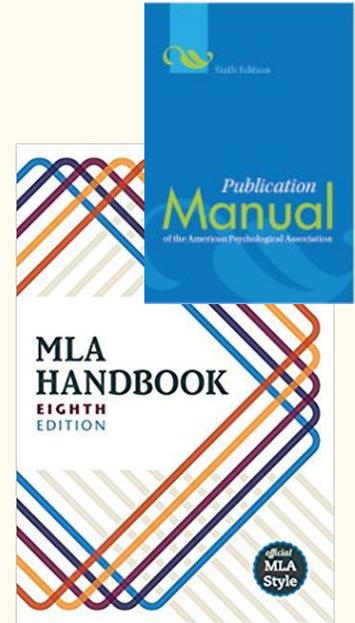
Cite *before* You Write

- Keep citation records of sources while reading and annotating
- Will make citing while drafting much easier!



Citation Tips

- Direct quotations
 - Only use them to...
 - call attention to special terms
 - reproduce striking language
 - Make sure to explain significance
- Paraphrase: restate in your own words
- Use in-text citation and complete references according to your field's style guide



Exercise: Fixing Citations

Complete the
exercise on
pages 12-13 of
the packet.

Lit Review Writing in Summary

- As you read, look for the “big picture”—your literature review should provide an overview of the state of research.
- Include **only** source materials that help you shape your argument.
- Balance summary and analysis as you write.
- Keep in mind your purpose for writing: How will this review benefit readers? How does it contribute to your study?
- Be meticulous about citations.

Exercise: Analyzing a Sample

Complete the
exercise on
pages 14-16 of
the packet.

Questions?



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Please fill out the eval: <https://tinyurl.com/YA82X60Y>

