# Strategies for Writing Literature Reviews

Characteristics of Effective Literature Reviews

- Outlining important research trends
- Assessing the strengths and weaknesses of existing research
- Identifying potential gaps in knowledge
- Establishing a need for current and/or future research projects

Steps for Writing a Lit Review

- Planning
- Reading and Research
- Analyzing
- Drafting
- Revising
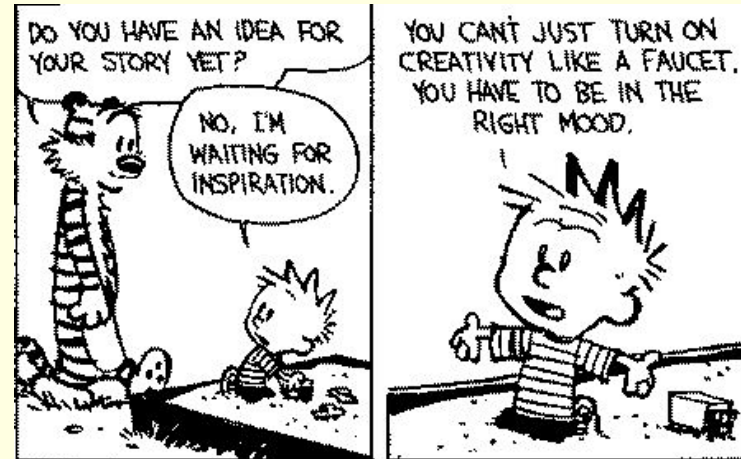
Planning

What Type of Literature Review
Am I Writing?

Planning

- Focus
  - What is the specific thesis, problem, or research question that my literature review helps to define?
  - Identifying a focus that allows you to:
    - Sort and categorize information
    - Eliminate irrelevant information
- Type
  - What type of literature review am I conducting?
  - Theory; Methodology; Policy; Quantitative; Qualitative

Planning

- Scope
  - What is the scope of my literature review?
  - What types of sources am I using?

- Academic Discipline
  - What field(s) am I working in?

Reflection

Take a moment to answer each of the questions in the "Planning" section of your packet about a literature review you are currently working on or plan to work on.

- How many of the questions could you answer?
- What questions did this short exercise raise for you?

Reading and Researching

What Materials
Am I Going to Use?

Reading and Researching

- Collect and read material.
- Summarize sources.
  - Who is the author?
  - What is the author's main purpose?
  - What is the author's theoretical perspective? Research methodology?
  - Who is the intended audience?
  - What is the principal point, conclusion, thesis, contention, or question?
  - How is the author's position supported?
  - How does this study relate to other studies of the problem or topic?
  - What does this study add to <u>your</u> project?
- Select <u>only</u> relevant books and articles.

Analyzing

How Do I Assess Existing Research?

Analyzing Sources

- A literature review is never just a list of studies—it always offers an argument about a body of research

- Analysis occurs on two levels:
  - Individual sources
  - Body of research

Four Analysis Tasks of the Literature Review

TASKS OF LITERATURE REVIEW

SUMMARIZE

SYNTHESIZE

CRITIQUE

COMPARE

Summary and Synthesis

In your own words, summarize and/or synthesize the key findings relevant to your study.

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

Example: Summary and Synthesis

<u>Piaget's theory of stages of cognitive development and Erikson's stages of psychosocial development are</u> commonly used for educational psychology courses (Borich & Tombari, 1997; LeFrancois, 1997; Slavin, 1997). <u>Piaget described characteristic behaviors</u>, including artistic ones such as drawing, as evidence of how children think and what children do as they progress beyond developmental milestones into and through stages of development.

Comparison and Critique

<u>Evaluates</u> the strength and weaknesses of the work:

- 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 <u>ambitious but flawed study</u>, Jones and Wang…

- These general results, reflecting the stochastic nature of the flow of goods, <u>are similar</u> to those reported by Rosenblatt and Roll…

Example: Comparison and Critique

- The critical response to the poetry of Phillis Wheatley <u>often registers disappointment or surprise</u>. Some critics have <u>complained</u> that the verse of this African American slave is <u>insecure</u> (Collins 1975, 78), <u>imitative</u> (Richmond 1974, 54-66), and <u>incapacitated</u> (Burke 1991, 33, 38)—<u>at worst, the product of a "White mind"</u> (Jameson 1974, 414-15). Others, <u>in contrast</u>, <u>have applauded</u> Wheatley's critique of Anglo-American discourse(Kendrick 1993,222-23), her revision of literary models…

Example: Comparison and Critique

- The situationist model <u>has also received its share of criticism</u>. One of the most frequently cited <u>shortcomings</u> of this approach centers around the assumption that individuals enter into the work context *tabula rasa.*

Evaluative Adjectives

- Unusual
- Small
- Simple
- Exploratory
- Limited
- Restricted
- Flawed

- Complex
- Competent
- Important
- Innovative
- Impressive
- Useful
- Careful

Analyzing: Putting It All Together

Once you have summarized, synthesized, compared, and critiqued your chosen material, you may consider whether these studies

- Demonstrate the 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."

Analyzing: 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 1:
Balancing Summary and Analysis

Look at the first example on p. 8 of your packet.

- What strategies might the author use to better synthesize this information?

Compare this example to the example below.

- How does the second example improve some of the problems of the first?

Drafting

What Am I
Going to Write?

Drafting: An Overview

To help you approach your draft in a manageable fashion, this section addresses the following topics:

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

Thesis Statements

The thesis statement offers an argument about the literature. It may do any of or a combination of the following:

- Offer an argument and critical assessment of the literature (i.e. topic + claim).
- Provide an overview of current scholarly conversations.
- Point out gaps or weaknesses in the literature.
- Relate the literature to the larger aim of the study.

Examples: Thesis Statements

a) In this article, we <u>review and critique</u> scholarship on place-based education in order to consider the ingredients of a critical place-based pedagogy for the arts and humanities. . . <u>We begin by reviewing</u> ecohumanism's call for a more locally responsive education in light of the marginalization of place and community…

Organization

Five common approaches to organizing the body of your paper include:

- Topical
- Distant to close
- Debate
- Chronological
- 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 that does not have one or two studies that stand out as most important or a clear chronological development

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 <u>two (three, four, etc.) distinct approaches</u> this problem.

- The <u>first model</u> posits…

- The <u>second model</u> 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 <u>first studied</u> by X, who argued/found…

- In (date), Y <u>modified/extended/contradicted X's</u> work by…

- Today, research by <u>Z represents the current state</u> <u>of the field</u>.

Seminal Study: Characteristics

- 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.

Seminal Study: Typical Language

- The <u>most important research</u> on this topic was the study by X in (date).

- Following X's study, <u>research fell into two camps</u> (extended X's work, etc.)