The Learning Centre UNSW & Division of Research

Reading the Literature: Some tips for HDR students.

Prepared by Pam Mort

The Learning Centre

In your first year of your research, you will prepare a preliminary literature review.

This task will help you to understand;

- The importance or significance of your research topic

- Past and current thinking about your research topic,

- Different approaches and tools used to research your topic,

- Gaps (things we do not know or cannot do) and possibilities in the research topic

- Where and how your research can add to the current knowledge and/or research approaches related to your research topic.

This handout includes some self-reflection activities and advice to help you prepare your literature review.

We recommend that you discuss your reading note-making, your thinking, and your literature review structure with your supervisor.

The Academic Reader - Identify Reading Type(s)

Consider the nine possible reading approaches on the following pages. Reflect on these questions.

Do you recognise yourself? When does a reading type suit your purpose? When does a reading type stop you from completing a task? What can you do to move forward?

Hoarder

- Always searching for another /more/better article/s
- Downloads/bookmarks/ keeps every article found – not a discerning 'collector'
- May not have a useful system for sorting articles
- May lead to drowning
- May be unable to start writing

Drifter

- Is interested in everything about the topic
- Reads/collects papers not related or directly relevant to the topic /purpose
- May feel lost due to unfocussed /eclectic reading selection
- May want to change topic
- May lead to hoarding

Decoder
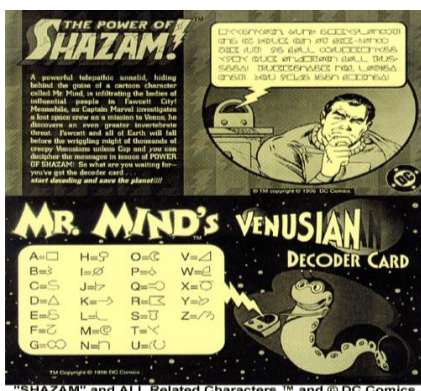
- Seeks to understand and know everything in a text
- Cannot move on until completely understands the whole text
- May be unable to complete any reading or be obsessed with a few papers.
- May lack basic knowledge of field/topic-
- May need to read some basic background texts.

Patchwork Reader/Writer

- Finds a lot of 'interesting' pieces of information
- Does not paraphrase-cuts and pastes from source -Plagiarism!
- Cannot demonstrate in writing an understanding of the literature- cobbles together many voices
- Could also be a decoder

Graffiti Reader

- Highlights, marks up a text as it is read- does not take separate notes
- Original mark-ups may become redundant / distracting.
- Unable to synthesise ideas/ thinking
- May stop reading or be reluctant to start writing.

Drowning

- Information overload- don't know where to focus reading/thinking
- Cannot distinguish key and fringe papers
- May need strategies to group authors/work, visualise the field or see the big picture

Interrogator

- Generates key questions before reading
- Questions the text during reading
- Takes notes , cross checks/verifies answers to questions with other sources
- Can become too negative – miss possibilities?
- Could be very slow to complete the lit review

Mongrel Reader (adapted from Thesis Whisperer, 2012)

- Strategic & focussed -one single clear question at a time
- Sniffs out (scans for) the answer ... then digs a bit , if nothing useful found, then sniffs around a bit more (scans another text)
- May miss key information or have assumptions unchallenged
- Requires high awareness of the literature and solid background knowledge

Critical & Reflective Reader

- Has a useful note-making system (e.g. Split page system, Annotated bibliography system)
- Uses similar strategies to interrogator
- Puts information in own words as much as possible
- Keeps a 'thought' journal – regular entries
- A good place to be – alert but not stressed

2. Strategies, Tools and Approaches to develop HRD Reading Skills

2.1 Conduct a Reading Survey

Do you know?

- What the reading task is? Why you should read, and what this requires?

- How to use UNSW Library databases and how to search effectively?

- How to use reference management software?

- How to adapt your reading approach to suit the text type and the reading purpose/s?

- What questions to ask when reading?

- How to take useful/relevant notes?

Ideas for topics to discuss with your supervisor

- Discuss suitable 'initial' reading and different approaches to reading.

- Show and explain examples of your reading and note making efforts if you need advice.

- Discuss different systems for storing and retrieving notes on the literature.

- Book a research consultation with the library

2.2 Consider How to Organise the Literature Review

(Sample notes provided in GSOE9400 ©Faculty of Engineering, UNSW)

A literature review summarises and evaluates the research that has been conducted in a particular field of study. It aims to identify the progress in the field, existing gaps and open problems, and provides the rationale for your study.

Organisation of the Literature Review

1. Introduction

The introduction of a literature review introduces the topic and its importance/value, presents the purpose or function of the chapter, and gives an explanation/outline of the chapter.

2. Body

The body of the literature review aims to answer the following questions:

- What is the field of research or the topic being reviewed?
- What major concepts, theories, or laws relate to the topic?
- What aspects of the topic have previous researchers already studied?
- What is lacking in previous research, or what requires further investigation?
- What ideas, possibilities arise that can be related to your research project?

The content of the body is organised in a logical order of headings and subheadings. This can be in terms of topics, themes, landmark studies, or chronology etc.

3. Conclusion

The conclusion should state the significance of what you have discussed, what questions /aspects are worth investigating further, what methods, or approaches show potential. Some literature reviews also include a brief direct reference to the writer's proposed or current research topic.
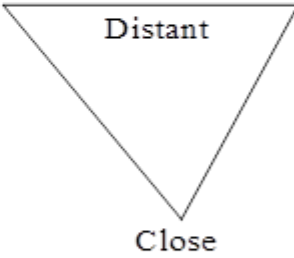
Also remember to:

- Follow standard report conventions for layout, visuals and expression
- Cite all your sources of information- use in-text referencing and include a list of references.
- Attach a signed cover sheet

We recommend you analyse past literature reviews in theses or review journals to become familiar with this genre. Length: 5000 words –plus or minus 10%. (Note – word count does not include Reference List)

Recommended resource: Ferfolja T & Burnett L, 2002, Getting Started on Your Literature Review, Learning Centre UNSW, Online https://student.unsw.edu.au/getting-started-your-literature-review

2.3 Structuring the Literature Review – Grouping Information

Most literature reviews will use a combination.

Chronological	Earliest …? ⬇ Latest - 2013
Classic/Seminal Studies (various landmark approaches/findings in the topic area)	Study 1 Study 2 Study 3
Topic/Theme based Organisation	Topic 1 Topic 2 Topic 3
Distant to Close relevance (begin with general and comprehensive and end with your specific focus)	Distant Close

Phenomenon and Research: two main parts that 1: review key theory and then 2:review current methods and results.	Laws/Theory
	     A
	     B
	     C
	 Method 1
	 Method 2
	 Method 3

Read literature reviews in theses and in journals.

What different ways have the writers organised their literature review?

What ways might you organise your literature review?

2.4 Ask questions as you read

You need to become an engaged reader with a critical approach to the literature. Use these prompts to focus your reading and your thinking about your reading. (From Bruce, 2012 - cited in fIRST Consortium)

What questions should I ask when critiquing an article?
- Who is the author?
- What is the motive for writing/doing the research?
- To what audience is the author writing?
- Does the author have a bias?
- What research approach or data-gathering method was used?
- What conclusions does the author arrive at?
- Does the author satisfactorily justify the conclusions?
- How does the study compare with similar studies?

(Engeldinger, 1988)

What does thinking critically mean? Consider how you would do each of the following:
- Distinguishing between verifiable facts and value claims
- Determining the reliability of a source
- Determining the factual accuracy of a statement
- Distinguishing relevant from irrelevant information, claims or reasons
- Detecting bias
- Identifying unstated assumptions
- Identifying ambiguous claims or arguments
- Recognising logical inconsistencies
- Distinguishing between warranted and unwarranted claims
- Determining the strengths of an argument

(Beyer, 1985)

How can I approach internet materials critically?
- Is your resource an example of vanity publishing or has it been through a rigorous review process?
- What evidence is there to suggest that the resource is of high quality?
- Who are the 'authors'? What are their credentials?
- How current is the resource? Can you establish when it was last updated?
- How complete is the content of the resource? How unique is the content?
- How easily accessible is the resource?
- Is the resource stable? Is it likely to remain stable?
- How well is the resource regarded? Can you identify how it has been perceived by the research community?
- Is the resource organised in some way? Is there a contents page, an index?
- Is there an abstract or other summary to communicate the nature of the document? (Tillman, 1996)

2.5 Form a Critical Synopsis of a Text

A simple yet effective reading notetaking template that you can adapt for soft and hard copy notes. (From Wallace & Wray 2011)

Author, date, title, publication details, DOI, ISBN, library code, location in my filing system.

   A. Why am I reading this?

   B. What are the authors trying to do in this writing?

   C. What are the authors saying that is relevant to what I want to find out?

   D. How convincing is what the authors are saying?

   E. In conclusion, what use can I make of this?

CODE:
1) **Return to this later**
2) **Important general text**
3) **Of minor importance**
4) **Not relevant**

2.6 Prepare Annotated Bibliographies

(Sample notes from GSOE9400 ©Faculty of Engineering UNSW)

Description
An annotated bibliography provides a brief account of a publication on a given topic. Many researchers keep records of their reading material in an annotated format similar to an annotated bibliography.

Assignment
Choose 3 journal articles relevant to your research topic. For each article, write a half-page annotation. Attach a bibliography list of all your reading to date. It should include at least 20 academic/authoritative texts related to your research topic/area. Also attach a completed and signed cover sheet.

Include the following for each half to 1 page annotation:

- Full bibliographic citation at the top of the page.
- A star rating ★
- Three to five keywords
- One to two paragraphs. Present the aims of the paper, summarize the main argument or key findings, highlight the strengths and/or limitations in the paper, give the contribution of the paper, and explain the paper's relevance to your research
- Attach your bibliography (reading list). Follow the style of a leading journal in your field.

Star Rating Key

★ General background only. I need to read this now to get started, but I probably won't reference this in my final thesis.

★★ Paper describes some important terms or fundamental concepts

★★★ Paper provides some background support to justify my research.

★★★★ Paper provides a key method/approach or analysis technique for my research

★★★★★ Paper is a key competitor or leading paper for my research. I need to clearly understand how my research is different from or builds on this research.

Recommended resource: Kennedy-Clarke S, Downey T, Mort P, 2006, Annotated Bibliography, Learning Centre UNSW, Online https://student.unsw.edu.au/annotated-bibliography

2.7 Create a Reference Map

Visualising the literature can help provide an overview of the key parts of the field and the key players .This strategy can help with deciding on the themes /topics and their sequence in the literature review.

A reference map visualises the most important literature from past to present and by common themes/concepts/ schools of thought. Begin by listing key dates/ years/ decades on the left hand side. Place key authors at appropriate time zones, circle/box related authors and give a theme/concept/field. Use arrows or overlapping circles to show where themes/ fields merge or influence. You can make a reference map of a whole field, a part of a field or even a single author (e.g. your own publications).
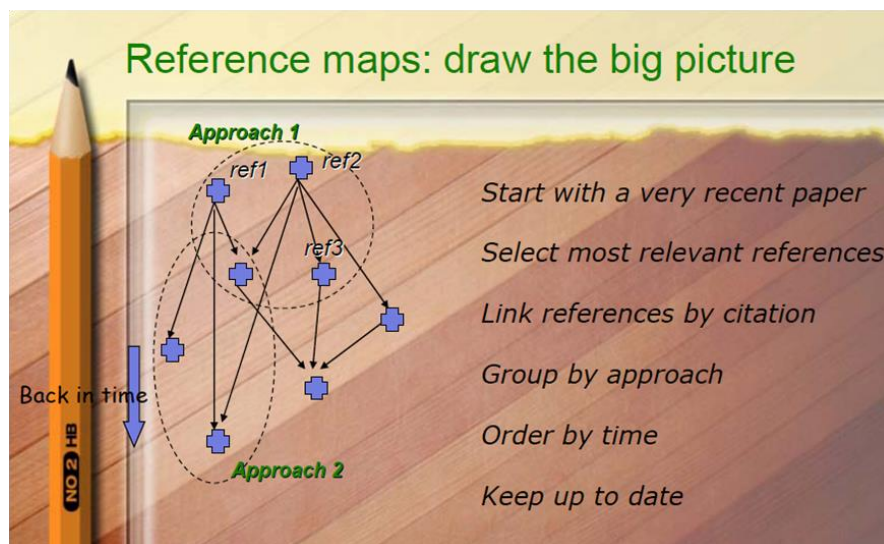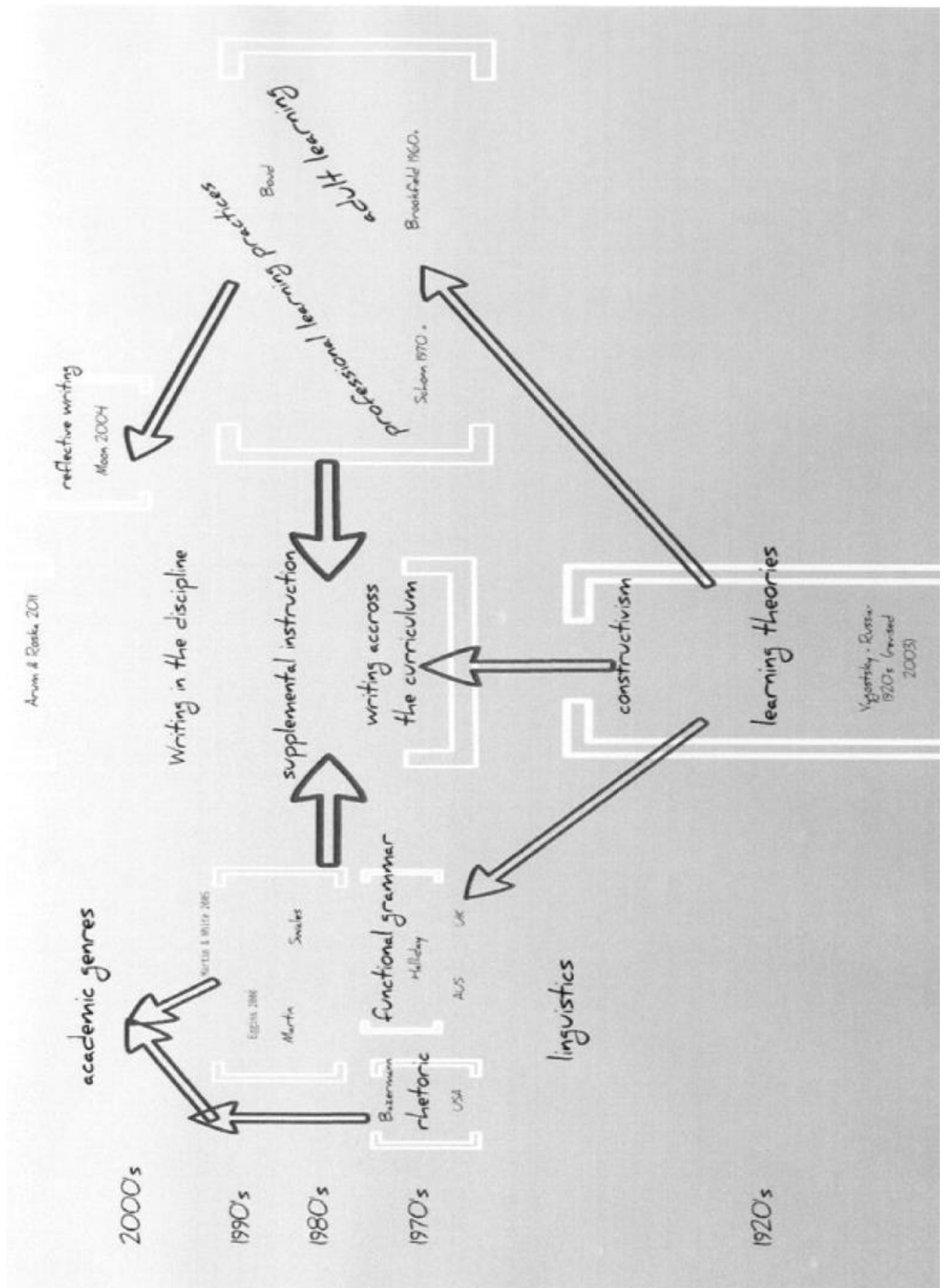

We are grateful to Dr Albert Nymeyer-CSE FOE UNSW for sharing his slides on creating reference maps of the literature.

Consider discussing with your supervisor the following to help you gain the big picture:

- Physical view (**easy: places, people, literature)**

  – Universities/institutes/labs, researchers, top conferences, journals, reference books

- Methodological view (**difficult)**

  – Different approaches: e.g. practice vs. theory, Schools of thought, Cross discipline influences

*An example draft reference map on academic literacy is shown on the next page.

P. Mort (The Learning Centre) & Natalie Haider (Division of research) UNSW© 2016

Aron & Roska 2011

2000s — academic genres — reflective writing Moon 2004

Writing in the discipline

professional learning practices Boud

adult learning Brookfield 1960s

Sutton 1970s

1990s

1980s — supplemental instruction

writing across the curriculum

constructivism

learning theories

1970s — rhetoric Bazerman USA — functional grammar Halliday

Eggins 2004 Martin — Swales

Martin & White 2005

AUS — UK

linguistics

1920s — Vygotsky - Russia 1920s (revised 2003)

3. Available Resources

Staff

- **The Learning Centre UNSW:** http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/
- **Online Academic Skills Resources:** https://student.unsw.edu.au/skills
- **Personal consultations with students:** https://student.unsw.edu.au/individual-consultations-academic-support

- **Library:** http://library.unsw.edu.au/

  - Research consultations
    - **Graduate Research School**: http://research.unsw.edu.au/units/graduate-research-school
  - The central administration and support unit for all HDR candidates at UNSW

- **2016 UNSW Postgraduate Research Handbook:** https://research.unsw.edu.au/sites/all/files/documents/pg_handbook.pdf

- **Induction Essentials for New UNSW Postgraduate Researchers 2016:**

  https://research.unsw.edu.au/document/induction_essentials.pdf

- UNSW Policy, Guidelines and Procedure

  - **HDR Supervision Policy:**

    https://www.gs.unsw.edu.au/policy/hdrsupervisionpolicy.html
  - **HDR Supervision Guidelines:**

    https://www.gs.unsw.edu.au/policy/hdrsupervisionguide.html
  - **HDR Programs Procedure:**

    https://www.gs.unsw.edu.au/policy/admissionstohdrprogramsprocedure.html
  - **Facilities and Resources to support HDR:**

    https://www.gs.unsw.edu.au/policy/documents/facilitieshdrstudents.pdf

Websites

- Thesis Whisperer (http://thesiswhisperer.com)
  A weekly blog on all things related to the thesis - very useful for students and staff.

- Patter (http://patthomson.wordpress.com)
  A blog on academic reading and writing written by Pat Thomson, Professor of Education in the School of Education, The University of Nottingham.

    - http://patthomson.wordpress.com/2013/06/24/how-much-should-doctoral-researchers-read/
    - http://patthomson.wordpress.com/2012/09/21/how-to-readnot-read-pierre-bayard-and-the-literature-review/

Software

- Scrivener software (virtual writing closet):
  http://www.literatureandlatte.com/scrivener.php

- Endnote training: http://endnote.com/training

Other

- Past theses as models and part of the literature (see your supervisor and your school office for copies)

- Writing a Literature Review (Video) - [North Carolina State University Library]
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2d7y_r65HU

4. References

Denholm, G. & Evans, T. (Eds) (2007) *Supervising doctorates downunder: Keys to effective supervision in Australia and New Zealand.* ACER Press:Victoria.

First Consortium (2012) *fIRST for improving supervision and training.* Viewed 21 April 2013, Available: http://first.edu.au/members/workshop/litrev **

Wallace, M & Wray, A. (2011) *Critical reading and writing for postgraduates* (2ed.) Sages Study Skills : London.