

Literature Reviews

Some random thoughts

Literature Review

- <http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/litrev.html>
- <http://library.ucsc.edu/ref/howto/literaturereview.html>
- http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/literature_review.html

What is a Literature Review

- **What is a review of the literature?**
- A literature review is an account of what has been published on a topic by accredited scholars and researchers. Occasionally you will be asked to write one as a separate assignment (sometimes in the form of an **annotated bibliography**--but more often it is part of the introduction to an essay, research report, or thesis. In writing the literature review, your purpose is to convey to your reader what knowledge and ideas have been established on a topic, and what their strengths and weaknesses are. As a piece of writing, the literature review must be defined by a guiding concept (e.g., your research objective, the problem or issue you are discussing, or your argumentative thesis). It is not just a descriptive list of the material available, or a set of summaries.
- Besides enlarging your knowledge about the topic, writing a literature review lets you gain and demonstrate skills in two areas:
 - **information seeking**: the ability to scan the literature efficiently, using manual or computerized methods, to identify a set of useful articles and books
 - **critical appraisal**: the ability to apply principles of analysis to identify unbiased and valid studies.
- A literature review must do these things:
 - be organized around and related directly to the thesis or research question you are developing
 - synthesize results into a summary of what is and is not known
 - identify areas of controversy in the literature
 - formulate questions that need further research
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Why do you need one?

- Formal requirement of all scholarship – to understand what you are doing and how it relates or adds to what has been done before.
- Enables you to indicate what is new and significant about what you are doing – and often helps to elucidate exactly what you want to do

How to begin preparation

- Make notes as you read – can be brief,
- Focus on key arguments of books or articles. Sometimes worth indexing your reading – noting where an important idea is so you can go back easily
- Worth noting whether and how particular reading helps focus your own ideas

Different kinds of reviews for different fields

- Assumptions in sciences and social sciences – not always the same as in humanities
- Always necessary to:
 - make clear that you know what has been written in your field
 - Make clear what is new and significant about your work and how it relates to other work in field

But.....

1. Questions about how much goes in formal lit review in Introduction and how much goes in particular chapters?
 - Often the 'lit review' is used for more general work that covers whole topic – while more specific work that is relevant to each chapter goes there

Literature review needs itself to be literature!

- Need to ensure that the discussion of the literature is coherent and cogent – and focuses on themes and issues rather than going through books or articles one after another
- Lit review is not an annotated list of readings. It needs to be organised and to contain an argument – it shows how YOU see the field in which you are working
- Think about discursive footnotes – can't or shouldn't deal with *every* work in your field – may need to indicate significant themes – and use footnotes to indicate how many works on theme you have read

Queries cont

2. Some research is not clearly in one 'field'
 - may require you to cover several different ones all of which overlap with your work
 - e.g. if you are working on women's lives or writing, you may want to refer to feminist theory or post colonial theory
3. There may be important works that are not formally 'in the field' at all - particular work that offers you a model for your approach

Tone of literature reviews

- Could be adversarial – pointing out what it wrong with or omitted from other works – and which you in your brilliant and original research will remedy
- Or could assume that all those working on a subject are in conversation – and lit review delineates what this conversation is
- Important to indicate what of value you have found in or taken from work that you might disagree with – or see as partial

Where does Literature review go?

- Different answers for different disciplines: History, usually is part of Introduction. Indicates where new work is located and how it contributes or adds to an existing field.
- Tendency sometimes to make review fairly short 6-10 pages – with other discussions of secondary work spread throughout thesis

Where does literature review go?

- Other disciplines sometimes require that it occupy a full chapter - before you go on to dealing with your research question and data
- This is the one aspect of your thesis that will not usually be done in this way later on: not popular to have extended lit review within books. Always need to locate your work within the relevant literature -but often in articles that takes just a very few pages

When does one write a literature review?

- Required as part of confirmation procedure - necessary to do it
- but usually this is too early to do a proper or final review
- Suggest that my students draft it early – leave final version until close to the end of complete draft, when they really know what they want to say about their own work and how exactly they want to approach the rest of the work in the field