

How to Write a Literature Review

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Updated: Jan. 14, 10

At this stage, your knowledge of the topic has a basic grounding through the work you have done on the annotated bibliography. The purpose of the literature review is to summarize what we know about the problem, and, more pointedly, to identify the frontiers of that knowledge so that you explain why your study is needed. The main problems students have are they tend to select a few articles on the topic that grab their interest and therefore are unable to create a reliable map of the knowledge about the topic, leaving them vulnerable to making basic errors in their analysis. What you have to remember is that academic articles are mainly written for the cognescenti, those who have been working on the topic for most of their careers.

If you analyze the trees without this forest level view, you have a high chance of (re) producing bias and missing key aspects of the debate. You should have done these preliminary steps as part identifying your research topic and creating a starting annotated bibliography. Your next step then, is to narrow the question down further into one that is both cutting edge (not answered) but feasible (there is a base of knowledge for it). Therefore the starting point of the research is:

What are the key paradigms used to explain the trajectory of the issue? We want to create categories that are logical and comprehensive ways to answer the question. What helps to explain the differences in those paradigms? What kind of variables, methods, and data help to explain these differences?

- 1) Step 1 is therefore to examine and categorise materials that represent the key paradigms that you have identified in your annotated bibliography. So, you really need to focus on how the various authors answer the key issues. You will start to see patterns among them that will help you to identify the clusters of approaches.
- 2) Step 2 is to begin your analysis of how the authors within paradigms agree and those in different paradigms disagree in answer to the question. You should take into account the general context of the author and the writing, the train of logic, the overall conclusions and recommendations and any other pieces that may help to explain this.
- 3) Step 3 is to examine carefully the evidence and methods used to evaluate it, including which cases/data are used. This, along with the general assumptions of the framework, can often explain why competing paradigms co-exist. You should look at the data sources listed and do some preliminary data tests to see if the evidence holds up.

Now you have a road map for the way that this problem has been treated and the “frontier” areas where there is dispute. I find that the best way to do this is to work in concentric circles, using a nested logical framework. This will be helpful if you decide your research is really within a paradigm, in order therefore to locate the study is one addressing an intra-paradigmatic dispute.

- 4) Step 4 is to begin to develop your own analysis about which paradigms make sense, which don't, and which are appropriate for the cases you are proposing to examine. Remember, you can find competing paradigms to be correct for different cases/contexts, or elements of them to be compatible. You can also reject all previous paradigms for your application, but then you must offer a better explanation. Or you can simply decide to see if the paradigm you have seen as optimal holds up to explain a (new) phenomenon.
- 5) Then go back and re-write your question again so that there is a clear flow, with distillation of the essence of the question from top to bottom.

The end result is that your literature review will conclude with the need for your study, in order to solve the existing puzzle you have demonstrated.

ASSESSING SOURCES

Begin the process of evaluating the sources you are finding by first reading the text and summarizing the author's main points by making notes, written or mental, annotations, or other means. In academic writing, you also need to be fully informed about the sources that look relevant to your research: for example, who is the writer and what are his/her credentials, what is the purpose of and audience for the publication and how does a particular source fit into the larger, ongoing conversation about this question. In other words, look at the factors external to the source in order to help you determine its credibility and authority. Answer the following sets of questions for each of your sources:

Author

Conduct a brief search on the author to determine his/her expertise, reputation, and credibility.

Look at citations, articles, and books by this author to find information about who the author is, what his/her credentials are, and what occupation or position s/he holds. Also check library reference sources (e.g., *Who's Who in American Education*, *American Scholars' Directory*) for author information.

Publication and Audience

1. Examine the publication for which the author is writing to determine the author's intended audience, and the publication's reputation, credibility, and target reader/researcher.
2. Look in the text for clues to what audience the author is addressing, e.g., specialized or general vocabulary, types of sources cited, explicit references to the audience.
3. Look at the publication itself: front/back cover, submission guidelines, editorial board. Use Library reference sources such as *Magazines for Libraries*, which give an indication of audience and types of articles. Once you're satisfied that your source is credible and reliable, you are ready to analyze the text itself.
4. Check out the Bibliography so you can construct your nested matrix of authors, identifying the key nodes (those who are authoritatively cited).

Argument/Evidence

1. Carefully read the text, looking at the evidence the author is using and the structure of the argument (e.g., whether it moves logically from point to point).
2. Identify the range of evidence (personal opinions or observations, research, case studies, analogies, statistics, facts, quotations, etc.).
3. Assess how the author presents and discusses alternative perspectives in relation to his/her thesis?

4. Locate any gaps or inconsistencies in the development of the argument.

Relevance/Consistency

1. Analyze the text in relation to your question and developing thesis, and in relation to other sources you've been reading.
2. If it supports your thinking, identify the assumptions/biases/perspectives influencing the writer, and how they compare to your own and those of other writers with whom this one agrees.
3. If it is an opposing perspective, identify the assumptions/biases/perspectives influencing the writer, and how they compare to your own and those of other writers with whom this one agrees?
4. Determine how this source contributes to your understanding or to generating new questions in your thinking?

WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW

Bearing in mind that a viable research question produces more than one reasonable answer, the literature review:

- Describes the kind of search that was conducted
- Summarizes, analyzes, and organizes the various responses found in the scholarly conversation regarding the question
- Explains why different scholars provide different answers for the same or related questions (i.e. accounts for the debate/tension in the literature)

As a result, the literature review does more than report the conclusions of researchers; it accounts for HOW those conclusions are reached.

Then, most importantly, it maps out the frontier of knowledge to justify the question you are proposing, how it fits within and in juxtaposition to existing knowledge, and how and why your contribution is needed.