

# Campus Academic Resource Program

## How to Write a Literature Review

This handout will:

- Explain the purpose of writing literature reviews
- Give a step-by-step process for how to approach literature review writing
- Provide general tips
- Provide examples and resources for literature reviews

### What is a literature review?

- **Literature reviews** are studies of the way your field writes. They are assessments of what has been said, what evidence has been used and what methodologies are at the forefront of fields. How they are organized depends on the purpose of the literature review. On their own, they may be used to examine the development of methodology. However, when included in a research paper, they may be used to show areas the field has neglected or to provide context for the paper's subject or approach.
- The most obvious distinguishing characteristic between literature reviews and any other paper is that literature reviews focus on secondary sources as opposed to primary.
  - i. Secondary sources:
    - Secondary sources are those in which scholars and others write about events. Example: scholarly articles, books, compilations, periodicals, documentaries, and historiographies.

### Why do scholars write literature reviews?

1. The purpose of literature reviews is:
  - i. To evaluate and recognize patterns in the field.
    - A good scholar will notice trends in the way people conduct research and the theories and sources they use. As a scholar, it is your job to decipher what those patterns mean and how they influence how you write your paper.
  - ii. To indicate what topics scholars are interested in.
    - Inevitably, certain parts of the field are more popular than others, possibly because they are more interesting and possibly because they are controversial. Regardless, looking at the progression of debates or finding out current interests will give you ideas for where you would like to go with your own research.
  - iii. To indicate how scholars have approached these topics.
    - Methodology is vital to fields because it determines what kinds of papers are written. Learning what kind of methodology your field uses, in combination with what kinds of sources it uses, gives you the information you need to judge whether the current consensus of the field is the most realistic.
      - It may be beneficial to review your knowledge of theory before looking for methodology. Some of the key theories are: structuralism, constructionism, modernism, postmodernism, positivism, realism, feminism, post-colonialism and critical theory. Be aware that many scholars may combine approaches or favor a small section of a theory. (e.g. post-colonialism is a part of postmodernism and Marxist theory is often considered part of structuralism).
2. The use of literature reviews for writers:

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- i. Literature reviews tell you:
  - What methods have been tried.
  - How successful they were.
  - How they changed the general consensus (or interpretation) of your topic within your field.
- ii. This information is especially valuable for researchers and writers because it helps them figure out what *has not* been tried, which often leads to a topic. Additionally, literature reviews provide a condensed version of an otherwise large field; they provide you with current debates as well as necessary background information and potential sources for your research.

Example: A historian interested in the witchcraft in early modern North America may read literature reviews about American witchcraft. In reading the reviews, the historian notices that every author in them talks about colonists. The historian also notes that many slave cultures had forms of what would be considered witchcraft at the time, but none of these are included in the essays. This gives the historian an issue to plan around.

### Beginning Your Literature Review: A Step-by-Step Process

1. Select a Topic
  - i. This might be the hardest part of writing your paper. At the very beginning, it helps to start with these questions:
    - What geographical location are you interested in?
    - What century or time-period?
    - Is there an event/movement/person that is interesting to you?
    - Are you interested in religious, ideological, political, social, cultural, or economic fields?
    - Is there anything you have always wanted to write about but never had the chance?

The goal is to end up with an extremely specific topic which addresses if not all, then most of these questions. Remember that your topic is not your thesis, so you do not have to have a fully fleshed out argument. For example:

Topic: *The domestic impact of the French Revolution on bourgeois women in the Danzig region of Prussia, from 1790 to the Unification of Germany in 1871.*

This is different from a thesis, which would look more like this:

Thesis: *The French Revolution's condemnation of the bourgeois lifestyle encouraged German middle-class women in eighteenth-century Danzig to adopt a more conservative fashion.*

2. Research
  - i. Preliminary research will tell you two things about the topic you selected:
    - Whether your topic is feasible to finish in your time and page limits: Some topics are massive and have hundreds, if not thousands, of people writing

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about them. In order to create a reliable, credible literature review, you need to read and assess a significant portion of that research, which not only may take you years to do but would result in your literature review as a book rather than a paper. On the other hand, if there is barely anyone writing on your topic, you may not have enough information to scrape together a credible historiography.

- Whether you need to narrow your topic down: If you type your topic into a search engine and get hundreds of thousands of results, you probably need to narrow it down.

It is 100% okay if your preliminary research ends up proving your topic infeasible or changes it drastically. Try as many topics as you need to, but be sure to decide on one within the first few weeks of your project. Nothing is more stress-inducing than trying to research, analyze, and write a 15-page paper in the last two weeks of the semester.

- ii. How to find sources:
  - Select a number of key terms about your topic. Be sure to include plenty of synonyms on your list for when you are looking through online catalogues and databases and indexes. Computers often search for exact phrases, so be aware that you may get more or less results depending on your word choice.
  - Search for those terms in books, encyclopedias, and databases. The SFSU library offers a number of beneficial, easy to use databases which can be found on the Research Guides webpage.
  - (for more information on researching techniques, see Summary and Synthesis at <http://www.carp.sfsu.edu>)
3. Create a Working Bibliography:
  - i. While you are researching, you should be creating a working bibliography. You do not actually have to read and analyze your sources completely to start working on the bibliography.
  - ii. **Step One:** Gather your sources.
    - It does not matter what kind of sources they are at this point- books, articles, journals, electronic materials, they may need to be rearranged later, but in the meantime, if they pertain to your topic, add them to your collection. **That said, make sure you are collecting secondary sources.**
  - iii. **Step Two:** Look for the main authors of the field and start writing citations for them.
    - The main authors will be the ones who keep showing up in writers' footnotes and citations. If an author shows up in the footnotes of multiple books, they are very likely a prominent writer in the field.
    - Compare different authors' literature reviews, bibliographies, reference pages, work cited pages, and (if you are lucky) additional resource pages. If there are commonalities, those are the sources you want.

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- Find and then make citations for these sources. You can do it however it works best for you--on note-cards, pieces of paper, or word documents on your computer.
- iv. **Step Three:** Handling the rest of your source material.
  - You know your main authors, so be sure to set them aside; now it is time to start in on the other sources.
  - Skim through every source and look for theses or arguments, sources, and evidence.
  - If the argument of a source relates to your topic (this includes arguments that oppose your main authors!) or if the references or evidentiary materials look like they could be useful, keep the source. If not, return it.
  - At this point, make your working bibliography for these sources since you know you will be citing them.

**\*\*It may be helpful to annotate your bibliography so you can tell at a glance which books have which points of view.**

4. Read your sources.
  - i. Dissect them.
    - What is the thesis?
    - What is the evidence?
    - How does the author use that evidence?
    - What methodology is the author using?
    - How do that methodology relate to their argument?

Write down all of your findings in post-it notes, in the margins, or in a separate document. Keep track of your information. You are going to need it soon.

#### **Pre-writing Analysis:**

1. Writing a literature review is about addressing what has already been written. Your paper should analyze how sources, evidence, and authors react to each other.
  - i. Think of all the ways sources can interact. Sources can:
    - Agree.
    - Disagree.
    - Expand on each other.
    - Apply new methodology.
    - Present new evidence.

It is your job to assess the credibility of these interactions, that is, to determine whether or not criticisms of an author's argument, evidence or methodology are valid. Usually, you will be able to note a trend, be it the adaptation of a new methodology over time or a shift in interest (such as a field moving from examining high classes to examining lower classes).

#### **Similarities**

2. Start by looking for similarities between sources. Similar uses of evidence, similar methodology, and similar interpretations will give you a good summary of the field as well as a sense of what the overall consensus of your topic is. Knowing the

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consensus is important because you have to be able to identify and either support or problematize it. The following sections offer analytical questions to ask yourself when evaluating your sources for similarities:

### Evidentiary similarities:

- What kind of evidence are scholars using and how are they using it?
- If evidence is being used in the same way, why?
- If people are using the same evidence, is such evidence exhaustive or is there more to be discovered or used?
- Are there particular pieces of evidence that have not been collectively addressed by the field?

### Methodological similarities:

- What are the main methodologies used to work on this topic? (Marxist, constructionist, postmodernist, etc.)
- Which methodologies been favored and why?
- What are the merits of using one methodology over another?

Example: Scholars of imperialism in the last fifty years tend to favor post-colonialism to examine the development of race-based ideologies. This methodology allows scholars to see racism as a spectrum according to levels of societies. They also allow them to see how racism functions as a construction perpetuated by societies. If these scholars used a Marxist approach, they would focus more on the economic results of imperialism and would write arguments around class struggles rooted in economic inequalities rather than social discourses.

### Interpretive similarities:

- What decisions have been made in terms of interpretations in the field?
- Why have they been made?

Example: Many scholars of the French Revolution argue that Committee of Public Safety used excessive violence during their reign. This interpretation is based on the accounts of French lay-peoples' recollections of the violence, inconveniences and tragedies that the Terror brought to their everyday lives.

## **Differences**

3. After you have noted similarities, start looking for differences. Differing interpretations within a field often lead to debate and criticism. Try not to get caught up in the drama and accusations. Ask yourself the following analytical questions when assessing differences.

### Evidentiary differences:

- Where does this new or differing evidence come from?
- Was this evidence available to the authors in disagreement?
- What consequence does this evidence, if credible, bring to the field?

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Example: Recent historians of the black plague have a whole host of medical knowledge regarding *Yersinia pestis* (the agent which causes the plague) that historians of the 1800s did not have. This means that current historians have more accurate explanations for how the plague was spread and how it behaved inside human bodies. Recent historians are thus able to provide scientific explanations as to why many people did not become ill, while nineteenth-century historians had only religious and antiquated medical theories to explain this phenomena.

### Methodological differences:

- What method is the dissenting author using?
- How does that methodology allow the author to come to this conclusion?

Example: One scholar uses a Marxist approach to understand the Russian Revolution. Another author uses a postmodern approach on the same topic. The second author argues that the Russia Revolution was the result of mass dissatisfaction and the proliferation of revolutionary discourse, which they prove through interviews and memoirs of low ranking revolutionaries. The first author might object to the second author, claiming that it was the establishment of the soviet which caused the revolution. The second author then points to soviet records and correspondence between the soviet and the tsar to illustrate his point. The difference is all in the methodology; the first author relies on structures to prove their argument which the second relies on individual experiences.

### Interpretive differences:

- What is the author's interpretation?
- In what ways does such an interpretation modify the field and in what ways does it maintain it?
- Is the interpretation the result of a methodological shift or an evidentiary shift?
- If not based on new methodology or evidence, what is the interpretation based on and is it credible?

### Assessing differences:

When assessing differences kept in mind that there are many factors which cause differing interpretations, and one of them is simply poorly conducted work. Sign of poor work include:

- Gaps in authors' logic.
- Primary evidence to the contrary of the argument (counter-examples are sometimes exceptions to the rule and must be identified as such).
- Lack of citation.

**\*\*You can use these questions as a pre-writing activity as you work through your source. Write them down and write out your answers to them-either in a free-writing or bullet point format.**

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### Organization:

1. Deciding on an organizational method: there are several ways to organize historiographical essays: chronologically, methodologically, or a combination of both.
  - **Chronological:** Chronological organization traces the evolution of the interpretation of a topic or the development of a methodology over time. Chronological organization can be accomplished in multiple ways, but it usually begins by pinpointing a turning point in the field. This turning point may be a debate or a new point of view. After you find a turning point, you can work backwards or forwards, depending which way most benefits your argument.
  - **Methodological:** Methodological organizational structures are mostly used in regards to ways in which scholars use source material. The way scholars acquire, interpret, and utilize sources will lead to different kinds of papers. This structure allows you to analyze the most common sources and how they have been used. It also provides you an opportunity to see which methodologies provide which points of view, which points of view scholars favor, and which provide the most realistic interpretations of your subject for your purposes.
  - **Chronological combined with Methodological:** There is a distinct possibility that a structure that combines both methodology and chronology would be beneficial for your paper. In such a situation, carefully consider whether your paper would benefit from tracing the development of methodology, including separate sections of both methodology and chronological interpretations, or using methodology to examine the subject's development.

You are not limited to this format by any means, if there is a connection you feel that you can trace through scholarly literature, but does not fall under chronological or methodological categories, you are free to pursue it however you like.

### General Tips:

1. Address secondary sources from credible, academic publishing or hosting sources.
  - i. Things to look for:
    - University publishing presses ( e.g. Harvard University Press, Indiana University Press)
    - Well-known publishing companies (i.e. Penguin Books, Pearson)
    - Academic databases (i.e. JSTOR, Historical Abstracts, International Studies Compendium Project)
  - ii. In many academic databases, articles will be labeled “peer-reviewed,” meaning that the article was reviewed by professional scholars. This is what you want, so look for them.
    - If an article is not peer-reviewed, be somewhat wary; the article may have recently been published or was not published to a well-known, credible journal.
  - iii. If you still are not sure how credible a source is, search for a review on it. The review will tell you whether or not other scholars take the source seriously.
2. Read other literature reviews.
  - i. The best way to become better at writing literature reviews is to read them. By reading literature reviews, you will not only develop an ability to tell the effective ones from

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the non-effective ones, but you will also have a model on which to base your own writing.

3. Avoid plagiarism by citation:
  - i. Citation within your field can be confusing because everyone is talking about the same thing and many times, you might not know what and when to cite.
  - ii. Things that you need to cite:
    - Arguments
    - Data/facts
    - Evidence
  - iii. Things that you do not need to cite:
    - Your arguments (unless you have published something and you are using the argument from that source, in which case-you **must** cite yourself.)
  - iv. Common Knowledge
    - **Common Knowledge** is the information that everyone knows and has accepted within the field.
    - Example: Everyone within the military tactics of World War II field knows that World War II started in 1939 and ended in 1945, therefore, it does not need to be cited. However, it is possible that not everyone in that field knows what kind of tanks were used in the French countryside in 1944, so that should be cited.
    - A good rule of thumb is that if the information can be found in 3 to 5 sources, it can be considered Common Knowledge and does not require citation.
4. Find where your argument fits:
  - i. At some point in your research, you may become confused as to what you are arguing and how it relates to the field. This kind of thing is very common and can be remedied by asking two questions:
    - What am I arguing?
    - How does my argument fit into the historical discussion?
5. Learn how to read efficiently.
  - i. You very seldom need to read an entire book to understand the author's argument and evidence. Read the introduction and the conclusion to understand the author's argument and then skim the body paragraphs for evidence and secondary arguments.

#### Literature Review Examples:

- Arnesen, Eric. "Up From Exclusion: Black and White Workers, Race, and the State of Labor History." *Reviews in American History* 26 (1998): 146-174.
- Barry Jonathan and Owen Davies. *Palgrave Advances in Witchcraft Historiography*. Great Britain: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
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