

THE LITERATURE REVIEW: A FEW TIPS ON CONDUCTING IT

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**--see the bottom of the next page), 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:

1. **information seeking:** the ability to scan the literature efficiently, using manual or computerized methods, to identify a set of useful articles and books
2. **critical appraisal:** the ability to apply principles of analysis to identify unbiased and valid studies.

A literature review must do these things:

- a) be organized around and related directly to the thesis or research question you are developing
- b) synthesize results into a summary of what is and is not known
- c) identify areas of controversy in the literature
- d) formulate questions that need further research

Ask yourself questions like these:

1. What is the **specific thesis, problem, or research question** that my literature review helps to define?
2. What **type** of literature review am I conducting? Am I looking at issues of theory? methodology? policy? quantitative research (e.g. on the effectiveness of a new procedure)? qualitative research (e.g., studies)?
3. What is the **scope** of my literature review? What types of publications am I using (e.g., journals, books, government documents, popular media)? What discipline am I working in (e.g., nursing psychology, sociology, medicine)?
4. How good was my **information seeking**? Has my search been wide enough to ensure I've found all the relevant material? Has it been narrow enough to exclude irrelevant material? Is the number of sources I've used appropriate for the length of my paper?

5. Have I **critically analysed** the literature I use? Do I follow through a set of concepts and questions, comparing items to each other in the ways they deal with them? Instead of just listing and summarizing items, do I assess them, discussing strengths and weaknesses?
7. Have I cited and discussed studies **contrary** to my perspective?
8. Will the reader find my literature review **relevant, appropriate, and useful**?

Ask yourself questions like these about each book or article you include:

1. Has the author formulated a problem/issue?
2. Is it clearly defined? Is its significance (scope, severity, relevance) clearly established?
3. Could the problem have been approached more effectively from another perspective?
4. What is the author's research orientation (e.g., interpretive, critical science, combination)?
5. What is the author's theoretical framework (e.g., psychological, developmental, feminist)?
6. What is the relationship between the theoretical and research perspectives?
7. Has the author evaluated the literature relevant to the problem/issue? Does the author include literature taking positions she or he does not agree with?
8. In a research study, how good are the basic components of the study design (e.g., population, intervention, outcome)? How accurate and valid are the measurements? Is the analysis of the data accurate and relevant to the research question? Are the conclusions validly based upon the data and analysis?
9. In material written for a popular readership, does the author use appeals to emotion, one-sided examples, or rhetorically-charged language and tone? Is there an objective basis to the reasoning, or is the author merely "proving" what he or she already believes?
10. How does the author structure the argument? Can you "deconstruct" the flow of the argument to see whether or where it breaks down logically (e.g., in establishing cause-effect relationships)?
11. In what ways does this book or article contribute to our understanding of the problem under study, and in what ways is it useful for practice? What are the strengths and limitations?
12. How does this book or article relate to the specific thesis or question I am developing?

Final Notes:

- A literature review is a piece of **discursive prose**, not a list describing or summarizing one piece of literature after another. It's usually a bad sign to see every paragraph beginning with the name of a researcher. Instead, organize the literature review into sections that present themes or identify trends, including relevant theory. You are not trying to list all the material published, but to synthesize and evaluate it according to the guiding concept of your thesis or research question.
- If you are writing an **annotated bibliography**, you may need to summarize each item briefly, but should still follow through themes and concepts and do some critical assessment of material. Use an overall introduction and conclusion to state the scope of your coverage and to formulate the question, problem, or concept your chosen material illuminates. Usually you will have the option of grouping items into sections--this helps you indicate comparisons and relationships. You may be able to write a paragraph or so to introduce the focus of each section.

CRITICAL READING TOWARD CRITICAL WRITING

Critical writing depends on critical reading. Most of the essays you write will involve reflection on written texts -- the thinking and research that have already been done on your subject. In order to write your own analysis of this subject, you will need to do careful critical reading of sources and to use them critically to make your own argument. The judgments and interpretations you make of the texts you read are the first steps towards formulating your own approach.

CRITICAL READING: WHAT IS IT?

To read critically is to make judgments about **how** a text is argued. This is a highly reflective skill requiring you to “stand back” and gain some distance from the text you are reading. (You might have to read a text through once to get a basic grasp of content before you launch into an intensive critical reading.) THE KEY IS THIS:

- don't read looking only or primarily for **information**
- do read looking for **ways of thinking** about the subject matter

When you are reading, highlighting, or taking notes, avoid extracting and compiling lists of evidence, lists of facts and examples. Avoid approaching a text by asking “What information can I get out of it?” Rather ask “How does this text work? How is it argued? How is the evidence (the facts, examples, etc.) used and interpreted? How does the text reach its conclusions?”

HOW DO I READ LOOKING FOR WAYS OF THINKING?

1. First determine the **central claims** or **purpose** of the text (its thesis). A critical reading attempts to identify and assess how these central claims are developed or argued.
2. Begin to make some judgments about **context**. What audience is the text written for? Who is it in dialogue with? (This will probably be other scholars or authors with differing viewpoints.) In what historical context is it written? All these matters of context can contribute to your assessment of what is going on in a text.
3. Distinguish the **kinds of reasoning** the text employs. What concepts are defined and used? Does the text appeal to a theory or theories? Is any specific methodology laid out? If there is an appeal to a particular concept, theory, or method, how is that concept, theory, or method then used to organize and interpret the data? You might also examine how the text is organized: how has the author analyzed (broken down) the material? Be aware that different disciplines (i.e. history, sociology, philosophy, biology) will have different ways of arguing.

4. Examine the **evidence** (the supporting facts, examples, etc) the text employs. Supporting evidence is indispensable to an argument. Having worked through Steps 1-3, you are now in a position to grasp how the evidence is used to develop the argument and its controlling claims and concepts. Steps 1-3 allow you to see evidence in its context. Consider the kinds of evidence that are used. What counts as evidence in this argument? Is the evidence statistical? literary? historical? etc. From what sources is the evidence taken? Are these sources primary or secondary?
5. Critical reading may involve **evaluation**. Your reading of a text is already critical if it accounts for and makes a series of judgments about how a text is argued. However, some essays may also require you to assess the strengths and weaknesses of an argument. If the argument is strong, why? Could it be better or differently supported? Are there gaps, leaps, or inconsistencies in the argument? Is the method of analysis problematic? Could the evidence be interpreted differently? Are the conclusions warranted by the evidence presented? What are the unargued assumptions? Are they problematic? What might an opposing argument be?

SOME PRACTICAL TIPS:

1. Critical reading occurs after some preliminary processes of reading. Begin by skimming research materials, especially introductions and conclusions, in order to strategically choose where to focus your critical efforts.
2. When highlighting a text or taking notes from it, teach yourself to highlight argument: those places in a text where an author explains her analytical moves, the concepts she uses, how she uses them, how she arrives at conclusions. Don't let yourself foreground and isolate facts and examples, no matter how interesting they may be. First, look for the large patterns that give purpose, order, and meaning to those examples. The opening sentences of paragraphs can be important to this task.
3. When you begin to think about how you might use a portion of a text in the argument you are forging in your own paper, try to remain aware of how this portion fits into the whole argument from which it is taken. Paying attention to context is a fundamental critical move.
4. When you quote directly from a source, use the quotation critically. This means that you should not substitute the quotation for your own articulation of a point. Rather, introduce the quotation by laying out the judgments you are making about it, and the reasons why you are using it. Often a quotation is followed by some further analysis.
5. Critical reading skills are also critical listening skills. In your lectures, listen not only for information but also for ways of thinking. Your instructor will often explicate and model ways of thinking appropriate to a discipline.

HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF READING

"Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested."

—Francis Bacon

Students need to read efficiently so they can get through all the material they're asked to deal with. It isn't really a matter of reading fast, but of understanding and remembering what you've read. Here are some tips on reading different kinds of material in appropriate ways. (See also the handouts *A System for Dealing with New Words while Reading* and *Taking Notes from Research Reading*.)

Textbooks

Textbooks can repay intensive reading—usually in some parts more than others. Note the signals from your professor or TA about what sections are most relevant, and know how each section contributes to the course, especially to the key concepts, issues, and questions in the course. Even before reading, become aware of the **structure** of the text. Look at the chapter titles, headings and subheadings first: they name the **concepts** (or large ideas) in the course and indicate ways of thinking about them. You can often gain focus too by skimming through the whole thing first, noting what aspects of the subject seem to get space and attention. Then read through the text with care, noticing especially **definitions** and **examples** of the important concepts. Look also for accounts of **disagreement** and for references to current questions and **issues** in the discipline.

Mark up only key passages in the text; don't rely on only underlining or highlighting. Use marginal symbols to show different kinds of points (e.g., asterisks for definitions, arrows for examples). Write brief summarizing notes in your own words, outlining the main ideas and the sequence of the explanation. That forces you to process the material in your own mind, and it helps you review later.

Primary Sources

Read through each literary work or historical document with attention to your own **responses** and **questions**. "Stickies" will let you express these on the spot without spoiling the pages. Many people find it useful, immediately after a first reading, to write out a brief journal account of their reading experience.

A quick re-reading of the work will then let you note how themes or techniques have developed through the work as a whole or how your questions were answered: use light annotations to show these patterns. Focus on some specific details and ask yourself why they're there and what they mean.

Research Readings

Be sure to focus your efforts before plunging in. In going through sources for a research essay, you are looking for ways to answer a research question you have formulated. (You have already gone through your textbooks, notes, and perhaps an encyclopaedia or other reference work to get background knowledge.) Now you want **information** to support or modify your original view of the topic, and others' **opinions** to bolster and to challenge your own outlook.

Use preliminary reading to help **choose** which sources will be useful. For **books**, scan the preface, table of contents and index to see the general outlook and argument. Then read sections on your own topic. If you see useful material, expand your reading to establish the context for any ideas that you might want to analyse in detail. (Never quote or paraphrase without understanding the context.)

Journal articles usually outline their argument within the first page. Read the abstract first to see if the article will be of use to you. If you decide to read it, do some skimming to see what gets attention, pausing over any charts or graphs. For a heavy scientific article, you may want to investigate a specific section of the paper—perhaps the introduction or conclusion, perhaps the results. Then read through the whole paper, noting how the details in the body of the paper support the points made in the introduction and conclusion.

Be especially careful of **Internet sources**. Check that a Web document, for instance, is written or published by an accepted authority on the topic. (Find the home page of the site by cutting off the final sections of the URL.) Note whether the file tells you what its own sources are, and check that they are acceptable in terms of your course. Then scan the material the way you would for journal articles, using abstracts and headings in the material, and experimenting with your own search terms. (For more advice on evaluating such sources, see the online advice from U of T at Mississauga on *Research Using the Internet* at www.erin.utoronto.ca/library/utml/common/services/researchinternet.html.)

Write down complete bibliographical information for each source consulted, making a master list as you go (preferably in a computer file). For notetaking, keep separate cards, pages, or files on specific points so you can arrange them as needed. Use a subject heading for each card. Summarize ideas in your own words (only occasionally paraphrasing or copying down quotations), and leave space for your own comments. (For further guidance, see the handout on *Taking Notes from Research Reading*.)

Further Guidance on Reading

U of T libraries stock many books that give advice on different types of reading, including the classic on literary reading by Mortimer Adler, *How to Read a Book*, and others focussing on academic literacy such as McWhorter, *Academic Reading*, and Giltrow, *Academic Writing*. General books on study skills often include sections on reading strategies: e.g., Walter Pauk, *How to Study in College*; Joan Fleet, *Study for Success*.

Here are some Web sites that give easily accessible advice:

U of T Counselling and Learning Skills, *Reading and Note-Taking: Textbooks*
www.caass.utoronto.ca/pamphlets/read.htm

U of T at Mississauga (library + Academic Skills Centre), *Research Using the Internet*
www.erin.utoronto.ca/library/utml/common/services/researchinternet.html

York University Counselling and Development Centre, *Reading Skills for University*
www.yorku.ca/cdc/lsp/readingonline/read1.htm

University of Guelph, *Learning from Textbooks*:
www.learningcommons.uoguelph.ca/ByTopic/Learning/Texts/Fastfacts-Textbooks.html

University of Texas at Austin, *Brief Suggestions for Increasing Speed and Effectiveness of Reading*:
www.utexas.edu/student/utlc/handouts/512.html

University of Toronto Biology 150, *Tips for Success*:
www.cquest.utoronto.ca/zoo/bio150y/tips.htm

University of Toronto Psychology 100, *Hints for Note-Taking, Reading and Studying in PSY 100*:
psych.utoronto.ca/~psy100/Handbookw2004/toc.htm

Prepared September 2004 by Dr. Margaret Procter, Coordinator of Writing Support, for use at the University of Toronto
This document and over 70 other files giving advice on university writing are available online at www.utoronto.ca/writing/advise.html

References vs Bibliography

What are they?

References usually come at the end of a text (essay or research report) and should contain only those works cited within the text. So, use the term '**References**' to cover works cited, and '**Additional Bibliography**' to refer to works read as general background.

A **Bibliography** is any list of references at the end of a text, whether cited or not. It includes texts you made use of, not only texts you referred to in your paper, but your own additional background reading, and any other articles you think the reader might need as background reading.

Both Refs. & Bibliog. must be in alphabetical order; and each entry must be laid out in a strictly ordered sequence. Examples:

Cuba, L. (1988) *A Short Guide to Writing in the Social Sciences*.
London: Scott Foresman. Chs. 2, 4 & 6.

Friedman, S. & S. Steinberg (1989) *Writing and thinking in the Social Sciences*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Hamp-Lyons, L. & K. Courter (1984) *Research matters*. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.

Ivanic, R. & J. Simpson (1992) Who's who in academic writing?
In N. Fairclough (Ed) *Critical Language Awareness*.
London: Longman. 141-173.

How do you compile a bibliographic entry?

A bibliographic entry is a 'reference' which offers readers a standard set of information that will enable them to either

- find the cited source in a library, or
- order it through a library or bookshop.

The information varies according to the type of source. We look at the 3 main sources:

- books
- journal articles
- book chapters or articles in a book

Note: There are many variations of format, even within the same discipline. Browse through the back pages of different journals to get an idea. Our advice is to choose a system you like - or your teachers prefer - and use it consistently.

In *Academic Grammar*, we use a simplified version of the 'house style' most common to the Social Sciences: the American Psychological Association, or **APA**, for all of our formats, as illustrated previously.

A typical book entry would be as follows:

Hamp-Lyons, L. & K. Courter (1984) *Research matters*. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.