

Academic Writing Tasks: Literature Reviews

Student Development Services

Writing Support Centre

UCC 210

www.sds.uwo.ca/writing

Outline

- ✦ Literature Reviews and Grad Students
- ✦ Gathering and Synthesizing the Literature
- ✦ Organizing and Writing the Literature Review

Literature Reviews

- ✦ Amalgamate and summarize relevant literature for a particular topic
- ✦ Do not present new research or findings
 - ✦ Unless in the very early stages
- ✦ Referred to as secondary literature

Literature Reviews

- ✦ Two distinct styles:
 - ✦ Annotated bibliography
 - ✦ Organized references in paragraph form
 - ✦ Critical evaluation
 - ✦ Commenting on the findings of papers, direction of the subject

Reviews and Grad Students

- ✦ Thesis
 - ✦ Proposal
 - ✦ Chapter
- ✦ Review/Survey Paper
 - ✦ Commissioned Reviews
- ✦ Introduction for Manuscript
- ✦ Grant and Scholarship Proposals

Literature reviews crop up numerous times throughout the life of a graduate student. They may have different names (e.g. survey paper, review paper), and the structure will be different almost every time you write one, the general purpose will always be the same. The literature review is an essential component of the thesis. Whether it is part of the proposal or it stands alone as a whole chapter, it is your opportunity to show your level of knowledge in your field. Especially successful literature reviews of novel subjects may be submitted as manuscripts; although, reviews are often written by experts in the field, this may be a way to get an easy publication under your belt. You should write to journals to see if they would be interested in a review before expending too much time and energy. Most manuscripts have a literature review section that either stands alone or is incorporated into the introduction. Many grant and scholarship proposals ask for a short literature review to orient the selection committee to your subject.

Gathering the Literature

- ✦ You should read as much as possible
- ✦ Use your library; talk to librarians
- ✦ Reference software (e.g. Endnote) can help you keep track of references and save time compiling your list

Snowball Literature Search

- ✦ Find the most recent article on your topic
- ✦ Find all the relevant articles cited in that paper
- ✦ Find all the relevant articles cited in them etc.
- ✦ Limited to looking backward

Synthesizing the Literature

- ✦ Develop your own methods for reviewing papers
- ✦ Write while you read
 - ✦ Take good notes
 - ✦ Write a short paragraph describing the paper
 - ✦ Connect the paper with other literature

Organizing the Literature

- ✦ You should read everything, but you should not write about everything
- ✦ Focus on the relevant papers and key findings

Organizing the Literature

- ✦ Adopt a general structure for your review based around your objectives

Organizing the Literature

- Objective: Deconstruct and make connections for a topic
 - Structure: Make logical groups/headings
- Objective: Detail the development of a topic over the years
 - Structure: Chronological Order

Organizing the Literature

- Objective: Review a controversial topic
 - Structure: Compare/Contrast; Point/Counterpoint
- Objective: Detail multiple views on one topic
 - Structure: Enumeration

Outlines and Freewriting

- Need some general structure before you start writing

Outline

- ✦ Start with headings and group your references
- ✦ Write out topic sentences for each paragraph
- ✦ Re-organize (split, merge, add, delete)
- ✦ Start writing

Freewriting

- ✦ Brainstorm the general focus of your paper
- ✦ Take a few key references (5 or 6) and write a short paper
- ✦ Start expanding on your main ideas and fill in details

Review Article

- ✦ Manuscripts submitted to journals that do not present new research
- ✦ May summarize one or many articles
- ✦ Usually commissioned by journals
- ✦ If there are previous reviews, you may want to focus on literature published after the initial review

Review Article - Audience

- Audience less specialized
- Readers want to keep up on the literature
 - Use general language
 - Focus on the big ideas

Thesis Literature Review

- Complete and comprehensive look at the relevant literature related to your thesis
- May stand alone as a chapter in your thesis

Lit Review: Introduction

- ✦ Effective introductions maintain interest throughout review
- ✦ The first paragraph in each section helps audience decide whether to read, skim or skip
- ✦ Be clear about the content of each section

Lit Review: Body

- ✦ Change up your sentence length and types
- ✦ Use active verbs and the active voice
- ✦ Avoid “Author A found... Author B found... Author C found...”
- ✦ Review the literature, don’t just summarize dozens of papers (make connections)

Lit Review: Conclusions

- ✦ Generalize and summarize
- ✦ Where will the research go from here?
- ✦ Stays in the reader's mind