

“WHAT CAN A LITERATURE REVIEW DO FOR ME?”

HOW TO RESEARCH, WRITE, AND SURVIVE A LITERATURE REVIEW.

Advanced research in humanities, natural sciences, social sciences, and engineering often demand a “literature review,” whether or not there is a chapter or section of the thesis actually going by that name.

Sometimes, faculty advisors expect a researcher to incorporate the findings of a literature review into the body of a research essay, even if there is no section in the thesis given that name. Often, grant proposals (such as URP grant proposals) are expected to have formal literature reviews, even if the conventions of your field do not require a formal section entitled “Literature Review.”

A Literature Review provides the meaningful context of your project within the universe of already existing research. “Meaningful context” can elevate your research from disconnected observations or number-crunching to the level of significance in the field of investigation.

The Literature Review sets the basis for your discussion or analysis or contemplation of implications or anticipation of further research.

You apply the principles of analysis in your field in order to evaluate whether previous research is valid; you determine if a previous study is incomplete, methodologically flawed, one-sided, or biased. This means that you do not simply list previous studies but that you assess them, noting their strengths and weaknesses.

Through the Literature Review you distinguish what has been done from what needs to be done.

You can synthesize previous perspectives and gain a new one; you can establish the context of the topic or problem, and you can set the basis for why the question is significant.

The Literature Review can help you (and the reader) understand the structure of the problem.

It can also place the research in a historical context, showing that the researcher is familiar with the most recent innovations in the field.

The significance of the Literature Review often mystifies inexperienced researchers, and its importance may be even more difficult to grasp when the particular line of research is unusual or not easily defined; and sometimes students become confused when their research seems patterned on similar projects or replicates previous work.

In many respects, the Literature Review presents the justification, the *raison d'être* for your work. Why does this research need to be conducted? How is it different from other studies? Where does your research fit within current knowledge and, therefore, what do you expect to contribute?

Inexperienced researchers often approach this task in a mechanical, uninteresting way, when, in actuality, the Literature Review is an exciting, essential component of research.

There are certain aspects of writing a research-based essay that are often confused with the Literature Review. They may be important, and they are often introductory, but they do not constitute the Literature Review.

A Literature Review is NOT an annotated bibliography – it is NOT an undifferentiated list of research resources each with a short descriptive paragraph.

Similarly, it is not a literary survey, an overview of one author (the novels of Herman Melville) or a summary of a researcher's life and work (even if your work is biographical, you will also have secondary sources).

Background information or explanations of important concepts may be essential but they do NOT constitute the essence of a Literature Review. For example, the definition of malaria may be important to a paper tracking malaria-bearing mosquitoes, but it is not the substantive part of a Literature Review.

Finally, a Literature Review is NOT primarily an argument for the importance of what it is you are researching. It is crucial to explain what is at stake in your research, and the Literature Review may explore this aspect, but usually the Literature Review assumes that the urgency for undertaking the task has already been established in earlier, introductory parts of your research essay.

Disciplines regard Literature Reviews differently, and have various conventions for how they are researched and presented:

Natural sciences and engineering have fairly determined conventions for an essay reporting on research that includes a section explicitly labeled “Literature Review” or, sometimes, “Introduction” or “Background” followed by “Methodology,” “Results,” and “Discussion” or “Implications.”

Social sciences have similar formats as natural sciences, although in some social sciences, particularly anthropology, there may be radical departures from the convention of an “explicit” Literature Review.

Philosophy, ethics, and often political science may have traditional social science formats, but they may have different ones or expanded or additional Literature Reviews that involve establishing basic premises and definitions of terms or models. For example, an ethics literature review will examine the different definitions of “justice” by different philosophers before establishing the author’s framework.

Literary and historical studies no longer have a single convention. In history, an “explicit” Literature Review may be expected, but frequently it is not; in contemporary literary studies an “explicit” chapter or section is typically not expected at all. In both literary and historical studies, Literature Reviews do NOT examine “primary” sources, such as all of Melville’s novels when writing about *Moby-Dick* or Richard Nixon’s secret tapes when writing a history of Watergate. However, previous histories of Watergate and critical studies of *Moby-Dick* would be the focus of a Literature Review.

WHETHER OR NOT YOU WRITE A SECTION OR CHAPTER CALLED “LITERATURE REVIEW,” YOU ARE USUALLY EXPECTED TO PRESENT YOUR RESEARCH WITH KNOWLEDGE OF EXISTING RESEARCH.

YOU ARE NEVER EXPECTED TO BE NAÏVE. However, depending on the scope of your research, your knowledge of the field may not be expected to be total.

RHETORICAL PATTERNS OF LITERATURE REVIEWS

The conventions in natural sciences and many social sciences call for an **“explicit” or “overt”** Literature Review. A specific chapter or section relates the history of previous research with a rationale for the work currently undertaken clearly in mind.

Literary and historical studies often call for an **“implicit” or “covert”** Literature Review. This means that a thorough knowledge of the critical or historical literature is assumed and works are referenced in the body of the essay as part of the process of discussion or analysis. The author raises another critic’s or historian’s work only when it is necessary to make a point or identify a gap in the field.

In most cases, a Literature Review does NOT include every bit of research done on the topic, but the researcher selects only the most significant texts. This already implies a process of evaluation and prioritization even before the Literature Review is written. The guidance of faculty or the researcher’s own experience helps to determine the quality of sources. Or, if a source is referenced regularly by other researchers, it can be assumed to be valid and valuable and therefore must be addressed. You need to work with advisors, librarians, and others in the field to make sure that you review all the literature necessary for your work.

A Literature Review is a piece of discursive writing that argues some position or point of view about research (notably, why your research needs to be done). In order to write it, you need to know what your thesis, problem or research question the Literature Review will help to define or clarify. Often, in order to decide upon a topic or question to pursue, you will review the literature in the field, but by the time you actually write the Literature Review, you are clear about your topic.

You need to determine the scope of your literature review and what types of literature you are reviewing. Often, this is determined by the nature of your study.

Literature Reviews usually follow a few key rhetorical patterns. Often these patterns are employed in combinations. Here are a few examples of rhetorical patterns, described in informal terms:

ROAD MAP: The researcher traces the history of knowledge in this field, one achievement after another, one study building on the work of the previous one, all of which points to one destination which happens to be the current work.

DÉJÀ VU ALL OVER AGAIN: The researcher identifies current knowledge, even existing methodology, but argues for some kind of replication for verification or variation such as a different sample

population. Replication is essential for natural and social sciences, so this is a frequent pattern.

SWISS CHEESE: The researcher presents a picture of current knowledge, identifying gaps or holes in the field, and argues why the current research plugs up one of the holes.

BATTLEBOTS: The researcher identifies various lines of argument, debates, and trends in the field, then situates the current research within that context and stakes out this study's position. This is common within literary and historical studies, but it also appears in social and natural sciences and philosophical research.

GUILT BY ASSOCIATION: Often, there is no research directly on the subject. In this case, the researcher has to construct a context based on inference using similar or related research. This situation is often felt as having too little material – but in fact the researcher unearths inferential sources.

EYEBALL SWITCH: In this pattern, much of the field or library material remains the same, but a new analytical or theoretical framework or approach changes the way the research is conducted. Consequently, the discussion focuses on the theory involved and research that may have been done using that perspective. This is often used in literary studies.

HOW-TO BOOK: In some circumstance, you may be required to write a Literature Review of the methodology you employ – a somewhat different mode than the context for your research. This is especially true if your methodology is unusual or a hybrid or a combination of different techniques. If this is the case, there is an *additional, separate* Literature Review incorporated within whatever methodology discussion you present.

RESEARCHING THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Unless you are so well versed in the field that you know all the current work, you will have to do some detective work in the library, on the web, or through other media to find the material, to understand it, and to determine the history of your line of investigation.

The following research tips can be summarized as “**COLLECT, SCAN, READ.**”

COLLECT all your material but don't read any of it in depth (unless your faculty mentor or your own knowledge of the field makes it clear that certain texts are “obviously” essential). One technique for “harvesting” sources is to identify the most recent texts in the field and examine its footnotes and bibliography. You can trace a historical “map” of research by examining other people's Literature Reviews.

SCAN your material (such as reading the first and last chapters, skimming articles, reading only the abstracts) to identify what you think might be important. Do not toss out what you do not think is important (you may be wrong or you might go in a new direction later), but put it aside for the moment. Keep a research log with bibliographic information and short notes identifying the material and evaluating its pertinence to your project.

READ prioritized material and determine their order of importance. There are often “meta-analyses” which are not studies themselves but surveys of studies, and these can be very useful to you for identifying the trends and debates within the field. At this point, after you have gained a sense of priorities, start taking notes.

There are a number of note-taking systems, from index cards to computer programs. Determine which is the most comfortable for you so that you can readily rearrange your notes to follow an order of quoted passages or a sequence of facts or a progression of logic when writing.

You should determine which documentation system is appropriate for the field of research before you complete your Literature Review.

Social science and natural sciences typically use the parenthetical APA, Political Science or related systems that privilege the author and date of study (Smith, 1987).

Literary studies most often use the parenthetical MLA style which privileges the author and page (Obenzinger 295).

Historical and philosophical studies typically use the Chicago Style or variants (such as Turabian) which employ footnotes or endnotes with bibliographic information and page numbers.

If you are working on an honors thesis, other advanced research project, or grant proposal, you are welcome to make an appointment

with me or my associate for editorial consultation at different stages concerning your Literature Review. Tutors are also available at the Stanford Writing Center in Margaret Jacks Hall.

Hilton Obenzinger

**Associate Director of Undergraduate Research Programs
for Honors Writing**

414 Sweet Hall, 3-0330

obenzinger@stanford.edu