

Chapter 5

From a Class Paper to a Publishable Review

Abstract One criticism of dissertations is that they often take a “listing” approach to reviewing the literature rather than synthesizing the research to produce a conceptual landscape of the field. This chapter addresses the most common misconception about the work of reviewing: that a graduate student “already knows” how to do this by virtue of having written papers as class assignments. It begins with various purposes for literature reviews and distinctive types of reviews (e.g., integrative, systematic, meta-analytic, and qualitative/interpretive). It then examines a developmental sequence for reviewing and common characteristics of high-quality, publishable literature reviews. A wide variety of activities are incorporated to build the writer’s confidence and skill in reviewing the literature. This chapter takes the stance that, commencing with graduate studies, students should strive to generate a literature review with publication potential. The chapter concludes with a type of literature review that well-established scholars might pursue, the position paper.

During my doctoral studies, I decided to minor as research, not because I was a statistical genius, but because I could do simple math. In looking over the curriculum, everyone was required to take three, 3-credit research courses and those 9 credits counted toward the 15 credits necessary for a minor. Thus, minoring in research enabled me to finish sooner. In order to get through those two advanced research courses, I was a frequent visitor to the Research Lab, a student support service staffed by statistics majors/graduate assistants. After our doctoral exams, I was astounded to discover that some of these brilliant students had failed. One of the questions on the exam on research and evaluation did not rely on statistics. Instead, we were required to respond to the assertion that, if a body of research is very inconsistent, we might as well rely on anecdotal impressions and opinions. It was the absence of one, right answer and the expository writing demands that had unnerved two of the Research Lab students. Finally, I was in the position of being able to reciprocate and help them with writing after they had been so helpful to me with statistics. The challenges they faced in answering that unexpected exam question

Note: Portions of this chapter were excerpted, with permission, from “What is a Theoretical Base and How Can It Help You Write a Dissertation? “Bidding Adieu to Chapter 2” published in the All-But-Dissertation Survival Guide on July 29, 2011 “The Literature Review: Avoid the Pitfalls and Make it a Project!” April 12, 2012

were similar to the ones they would face in writing the first two chapters of the dissertation—namely, they would need to attain a high level of synthesis/evaluation, rely on evidence from the literature to support their claims, and present a logical argument in words rather than numbers. What makes these tasks so problematic? Perhaps the first hurdle is underestimating what is expected.

Commencing in secondary school, many students are called upon to write what is loosely described as the “research paper”. These manuscripts typically are produced by reading a handful of sources and building a paper around them. They frequently dwell in the shadowlands of intellectual property—ranging from outright plagiarism to barely paraphrased. By the time that most students finish a master’s degree, they have amassed quite a bit of experience with reviewing the literature. What they may fail to realize—at least, at first—is that the level of review required for these tasks and the level of review required to be publishable are as different as making a cake by following the directions on the box and creating beautifully decorated wedding cake. In the first case, producing a reasonably palatable outcome is well within the capabilities of an ordinary person while, in the second case, only a skilled baker could achieve the result. Many academic authors presume that that they are expert reviewers of the literature when they are not. This chapter will define the literature review, suggest a developmental sequence in acquiring the skills of reviewing, explore the different purposes for reviewing, provide guidelines for conducting a review, and coach authors in making their literature reviews of publishable quality. As an initial step in thinking about the literature review, respond to the questions in Activity 5.1. If you have completed your dissertation, go through the questions from the perspective of mentoring a doctoral candidate. Research suggests that advisers felt the least qualified to assist students with Chap. 2 (Zaphorozhnetz, 1987), and these items can assist with identifying common misconceptions about the literature review among doctoral students.

Activity 5.1: Rethinking the Literature Review

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements using the Likert scale below.

SA = Strongly Agree A = Agree U = Undecided D = Disagree SD = Strongly Disagree

1. The primary purpose of conducting a literature review as required in Chap. 2 of the dissertation is to locate authoritative sources of support for your research.

SA A U D SD

2. The hallmark of a high-quality Chap. 2 is reporting on as many sources as possible.

SA A U D SD

3. When conducting a review, the author is obligated to consult the primary sources rather than use secondary sources (e.g., “as cited in”).

SA A U D SD

4. Doctoral students have extensive experience reviewing the literature; therefore, Chap. 2 usually is the easiest chapter to write.

SA A U D SD

5. Upon successful defense of the dissertation, Chap. 2 is essentially ready to publish as a review of the literature article for a professional journal.

SA A U D SD

6. Chapter 2 of the dissertation requires numerous headings and subheadings to guide the reader through the logical thought process of the author.

SA A U D SD

7. Literature reviews can have very different purposes and audiences.

SA A U D SD

ANSWERS

- At times, those new to reviewing tend to be drawn to those sources that complement their point of view. However, in the interest of providing a balanced review, both studies that support and refute findings need to be included. Readers fully anticipate that dissenting opinions exist, so it does not weaken your argument to address positions that are in opposition to your own. Although it isn't necessary to belabor those studies, you should at least mention them and explain why your position differs.
- While a sufficient quantity of research needs to be reviewed an exhaustive review of every possible publication is not necessary or appropriate. Sources need to be authoritative; in other words, theories, research, and professional wisdom that have been subjected to peer review and published in widely respected outlets (Ngai & Wat, 2002). Review are selective, not in the sense of being biased, but in the sense of preferring high-quality sources.
- Many times, something is “lost in translation” and secondary sources can introduce errors into a review. To the greatest extent possible, authors need to go to the original rather than accept someone else's accuracy in getting a direct quotation right or another person's interpretation of the research.
- Actually, Chap. 2 often is the most difficult to write because students become overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the task. Zaporozhietz (1987) found that dissertation advisors tended to assume that their advisees had doctoral-level

reviewing skills when this was not always the case. Advisors also admitted to being poorly equipped to deal with flawed reviews of the literature and knowing how to guide students in revising them.

5. An ordinary Chap. 2 tends to be unpublishable because it takes a “this study found this, this study found that” approach. Publishable reviews have to go beyond a mere retrospective to synthesize and critically reappraise the scholarly work published thus far on a particular topic (Cooper, 1998; Mertler & Charles, 2005). Literature reviews written as assignment or thesis also have a different audience and purpose than published reviews.
6. Prior to writing Chap. 2, most students have limited experience with headings, much less subheadings; however, headings are important when presenting a logical progression of ideas and helping the reader to navigate through the material. Writers of dissertations sometimes think that they will save time if they wait to prepare a table of contents; this is a mistake. They should develop the table of contents concurrently with the chapters and share it with the committee so that they can preview the chapters before reading a lengthy document.
7. There are many distinctive types of literature reviews, as this chapter will describe. Some of them rely on statistical analysis (e.g., a meta-analytic review) while others are more sharply focused on addressing a problem (e.g., a best evidence synthesis).

Understanding Literature Reviews

A literature review is “a narrative essay that integrates, synthesizes, and critiques the important thinking and research on a particular topic” (Merriam, 2009, p. 55). Inexperienced writers of literature reviews frequently are surprised by this definition; they definitely do not produce literature reviews that tell the story of a body of research, tend to list the sources rather than synthesize them, and definitely have not presumed to point out the flaws in others’ research (Holbrook, Bourke, Fairbairn, & Lovat, 2007).

In academic contexts, the characteristics of a high-quality literature review are

- Breadth of resources in the discipline and related disciplines
- Depth of the literature review that includes historical and theoretical works and quality of sources
- Currency as shown through recent scholarly citations
- Relevancy as demonstrated through a cohesive argument
- Rigor and consistency in appraising and reporting others’ work
- Clarity and brevity in writing
- Critical analysis of sources cited
- Synthesis of related material into clusters and themes (Hart, 2009; Jalongo & Heider, 2014; Tunon & Brydges, 2006)

Online Tool Check out the Adelphi University Libraries tutorial, Conducting a Literature Review in Education and the Social Sciences <http://libraries.adelphi.edu/research/tutorials/EdLitReview/>.

A fundamental understanding about reviewing the literature is that it is not something to check off a “to do” list that can be dashed off to schedule in a simple, linear fashion. First of all, the most successful literature reviews tend to emanate from not only delving deeper but also by digging in a different place—in other fields and disciplines. Interdisciplinary approaches help to generate something new out of available and stored information and yield new insights—the very definition of creativity. Second, it is not possible at the outset to know where the data will lead. In order to arrive at conclusions and recommendations, the researchers need to comment on how their research departs from or confirms previous work—and this cannot be done if there are holes in the existing literature review. In fact, as a study develops, it is not uncommon for dissertation committees to suggest other areas of research that ought to be added to Chap. 2. Third, some doctoral candidates make the mistake of ignoring the literature review after it has received preliminary approval from their dissertation committees. Doing this not only may cause the writer to overlook the very latest research findings but also results in failing to refine the work until the writing flows. Even more sophisticated skills than those developed during a master’s degree or a doctoral program usually are necessary in order to produce a publishable review of the literature (Holdstein & Aquiline, 2014).

Online Tool Try this tool to help organize a review: Notar, C. E. & Cole, V. (2010). Literature review organizer. *International Journal of Education*, 2(2), E2. www.macrothink.org/journal/index.php/ije/article/view/319.

Purposes for a Literature Review

The general purposes of a literature review are to: describe, summarize, evaluate, clarify and synthesize (Cooper, 1988). The literature review “creates a firm foundation for advancing knowledge. It facilitates theory development, closes areas where a plethora of research exists, and uncovers areas where research is needed” (Webster & Watson, 2002, p. 13).

Table 5.1 describes the many different purposes that a literature review can serve.

Most of what is written about literature reviews tends to focus on potential benefits for those seeking to conduct research, whether novice or experienced. Machi and McEvoy (2009) define the literature review as it relates to original research; it is a piece of writing that “presents a logically argued case founded on a comprehensive

Table 5.1 Multiple purposes for the literature review

Self-study—to build background and confidence in writing authoritatively about a topic. This is the dominant use for literature reviews conducted by college students

Context—to enable researchers to situate their work within in the larger context, thereby making the nature of their original contribution clear

Historical, theoretical, and methodological—to trace trends in the development of ideas over time, identify major paradigm shifts, and examine methods used to study phenomena

Integrative—to identify the “state of the art” on a given topic and serve as “a critically useful interpretation and unpacking of a problem that situates the work historically and methodologically” (Lather, 1999, p. 3). As such, reviews can assist researchers from different disciplinary specialties to see a topic of interest from the unique perspective of various experts

Sources: Jalongo & Heider (2014) and Neuman (2009)

understanding of the current state of knowledge about a topic of study. This case establishes a convincing thesis to answer the study’s question” (p. 4). Activity 5.2 summarizes the six steps that they recommend reviewing the literature prior to launching a research project.

Activity 5.2: The Literature Review as a Foundation for Original Research

Look at the sequence below. Compare/contrast it to the work of reviewing that you have done thus far.

1. Select a topic
2. Search the literature
3. Develop the argument
4. Survey the literature
5. Critique the literature
6. Write the review (Machi & McEvoy, 2009)

Unless you have some experience with writing research, your process may have skipped over steps 3 and 5. How can you institute this more in-depth approach to reviewing the literature?

Reviewing the literature can save time, effort, and resources invested in pursuing research. It helps researchers by identifying gaps in the literature, avoiding the wasted effort of pursuing a trivial problem, or investing resources in studies with methodological flaws already identified by others (Merriam, 2009).

Online Tool Go through the tutorial from North Carolina State University that discusses literature reviews: An Overview for Graduate Students <http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/tutorials/lit-review/>

Types of Literature Reviews

There are several distinctive types of reviews:

- *Integrative reviews* seek to synthesize and critique a diverse body of professional knowledge.
- *Systematic reviews* deliberately narrow the scope of a review to yield an evidence-based decision.
- *Meta-analytic reviews* set criteria for inclusion and conduct a quantitative analysis of data from previously published research to arrive at patterns
- *Qualitative reviews* supply one person’s narrative interpretation of a diverse body of literature to promote further reflection and accept multiple perspectives (Jalongo & Heider, 2014)

Developmental Sequence in Reviewing

Bruce (1994) found that students’ interactions with the research literature were developmental. At first (e.g., as undergraduates), they tended to conceptualize the work of reviewing almost like a scavenger hunt, reflected in questions such as: “Can we count our textbook as one of the references?” or “If we use two chapters from the same book, does that count as one or two?” Simplistic, linear conceptualizations of the process of reviewing are a major impediment to a successful literature review. It is not until students are fully immersed in the research that they begin to use reviews to shape their thinking, identify areas of research that are needed, and see how their work could make a contribution. Table 5.2 illustrates the developmental progression.

Access to a high-quality academic library is a must when conducting a literature review. This can be a particular challenge for international scholars if they do not have reliable internet connections, if their libraries do not have access to the journal articles, or if the cost of downloading an article or book is prohibitive. Even scholars who do have a well-equipped academic library may find that books or articles have

Table 5.2 Levels of understanding about the literature review process

<i>List</i> —a collection of references without in-depth knowledge of content
<i>Search</i> —an emphasis on the strategies for locating relevant materials
<i>Survey</i> —a representation of immersion in the knowledge base
<i>Vehicle for learning</i> —the reviewer interacts with material and is influenced by it
<i>Research facilitator</i> —the literature review shapes the reader’s thinking and guides original research
<i>Tool for entering the professional dialogue</i> —a synthesis/final representation of the researcher’s interaction with and evaluation of the literature

Adapted from Bruce, 1994

to be ordered through interlibrary loan, which can be time consuming. At other times, academic authors have a wealth of resources available to them but do not use them wisely; for example, they may use whatever search engine pops up first rather than select the best one, given their topic and purpose. In every case, the best advice is to find a way to link with a research library, begin the search early to allow time for interlibrary loan materials to arrive, consult with an academic librarian, and to augment efforts with technology tools, such as Google Scholar.

Activity 5.3 highlights the behaviors that enable academic authors to produce publishable reviews.

Activity 5.3: Capabilities of Reviewers of the Literature

What attributes do reviewers need to have in order to produce a high-quality, publishable literature review? As you read through the list below, indicate which of these characteristics are personal strengths or weaknesses that you will need to shore up in order to succeed:

- Information literacy, defined as “a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information” (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2000, p. 2)
- Ability to understand the methodological qualities of studies
- Willingness to invest time and mental energy
- Capacity for processing a huge amount of material
- Attention to details and accuracy
- Ability to form a mental landscape of the literature
- Tolerance for ambiguity when coping with an unstructured problem
- Commitment to making a contribution (Lather, 1999)

Online Tool Watch textbook author Michael Quinn Patton discuss “Literature Reviews: Common Errors Made When Conducting a Literature Review” on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NiDHO3NHRA>.

Errors in Reviewing

The worst mistakes in reviewing—and ways to avoid them—are discussed below.

Plagiarism—take notes carefully and document all sources. Clearly differentiate between your thoughts and others’ ideas in notes. Check your work using a free plagiarism detector such as Turnitin to get a similarity score with published work; your score should be less than 5–8%. When graduate students get much higher scores, they often are shocked but, even if your sources are documented, using too many long quotations will bump up the percentage of similarity with published sources.

Inadequate sources—choose the appropriate data bases, work with an academic librarian, select scholarly sources (reputable, peer-reviewed publications) rather than popular sources, develop effective search strategies, discuss your idea with an expert in the field, search within your discipline and in other disciplines. Novices sometimes rely on professional opinion pieces or textbooks (which are secondary sources) rather than seeking out more authoritative sources with research evidence that can be more arduous to read.

Weak argument—learn more about the common fallacies in logical arguments and how to avoid them, use authoritative definitions from the professional literature (rather than the dictionary), support assertions with evidence, supply concise examples to illustrate key points.

Online Tool For a humorous look at logical fallacies, see “An Illustrated Book of Bad Arguments” (Almosawwi, 2013) at <https://bookofbadarguments.com/>.

Errors of fact—Use primary sources; check, check, and double check everything; present a balanced view and include conflicting findings; include more details on the findings from major studies; and synthesize the findings of less important studies.

Listing—avoid boring lists in which each paragraph begins with a name and a date; chunk information and strive for meaningful synthesis; compare, contrast, and critique rather than merely report; cluster minor studies with similar findings together; and strive to emulate the writing style of published literature reviews (Jalongo & Heider, 2014). Table 5.3 highlights the types, functions, and questionable practices related to citing others’ work.

Indicators of Quality in Literature Reviews

Clearly, there are some shared attributes of high-quality literature reviews. They are explained below.

Thoroughness and Authoritativeness

Given the exponential growth of knowledge, the range of what might be read to review the literature on a topic in its entirety is staggering. This situation calls upon reviewers to make choices about which sources to include. Some general criteria concerning what to cite are: (1) leaders in the field, (2) classic and contemporary sources, (3) relevance to the study, and (4) work that is significant, based on originality and insight.

Table 5.3

Appropriate citation practices	
Verification	The reader should be able to check the source for its accuracy and the accuracy with which it is reported
Acknowledgement	The source is given credit for its contribution
Documentation	The source is identified as the object of the research in its own right
Questionable citation practices	
Convenience citation	Selects citation material that is easy to find
Grey literature citation	Relies heavily on unpublished material, such as conference presentations, submitted articles, and in-house papers and reports
Reputation citation	Cites a work or part of a work as self-promotion, to enhance the reputation of a friend or to curry favor with an editor
Viewpoint citation	Cites a work or part of a work purely because it supports a given hypothesis or idea rather than because it adheres to standards of quality; deliberately neglects to report findings that do not support the thesis

Source: West and Stenius (2009)

Some advice on searching includes:

1. Develop a research plan appropriate to the investigative method
2. Identify keywords, synonyms, and related terms for the information needed—try using a thesaurus of search terminology. Broaden or narrow the search as necessary, for instance if you were studying how doctoral students develop a conceptual framework for their dissertation research and “doctoral students” yields too many hits, add AND “dissertations” and to further narrow it, add AND “conceptual frameworks”
3. Check out the vocabulary associated with the articles that were most helpful to identify additional search terms; for instance, look at the “Find Similar Results” listings for those articles.
4. Conduct a “backwards search” using the reference lists of published sources to lead you to other relevant works (Horsley, Dingwall & Sampson, 2011).

Sources should be evaluated based on six criteria identified by Association of College and Research Libraries (2000): (1) “reliability, (2) validity, (3) accuracy, (4) authority, (5) timeliness, and (6) point of view or bias” (ACRL, 2000, p. 11). Questions to guide reviewers may critically evaluate a scholarly resource by asking themselves the following questions:

1. Who is the author of the material?
2. When was the information published?

3. Is the material published in an academic article, a newspaper or a textbook?
4. How relevant is the material to the reviewer's research question(s)?
5. What is the author's overall purpose? What led the author to his/her hypotheses?
6. What methods were utilized by the author and why?
7. What results were obtained?
8. Were hypotheses supported?
9. What were the author's conclusions/recommendations?
10. Does the author provide a detailed list of references/bibliography?
11. Has the article, book or website been cited or referred to by other authors?
(Lawlor & Gorham, 2004, p. 17)

Synthesis

Inexperienced academic authors often struggle with the recommendation that they synthesize the research. The reason for this is that synthesis is a cognitively challenging task. Some simple indicators that you are not synthesizing are: (1) writing that reads more like a list, (2) page after page of text with few or no headings and subheadings, (3) work clustered by author or date rather than themes or patterns, (4) excessive use of direct (and sometimes lengthy) quotations, (5) little effort to transition from one idea to the next, and (6) absence of evaluative commentary (i.e., strengths/weaknesses, comparison/contrast, interpretation/implications).

To better understand synthesis, consider the following metaphor. Imagine you have just participated in a panel discussion consisting of five professors discussing the same, important issue in your field. The beginning portion of your literature review would be similar to the panel moderator who initiates the discussion and sets the tone for the conversation with some remarks. The main sections of your literature review would be similar to the theme and focus selected by each of the speakers to frame their presentation and their areas of agreement and disagreement. The conclusion would be comparable to the moderator's closing remarks that acknowledge the areas of agreement and disagreement, yet provide a sense of closure to the discussion. Some tools for achieving synthesis are in Activity 5.4.

Activity 5.4: Practical Ways to Attain Greater Synthesis

After authors can cite studies, people, dates, theories, and historical trends, they have command of the literature. Nevertheless, a common statement after arriving at that point is some version of, "Okay, I have all of this information—now, what do I do with it?" Some practical strategies follow.

1. **Start chunking information.** Create a mind map and cluster ideas together—and not in the most obvious way. Look for trends, themes, patterns rather than names and dates, for example.

2. **Identify the “stepping stones” in your argument.** Usually you need to arrange your ideas from general to specific—think of it as an upside-down triangle that is broad at the top and narrows to your point. For example, the literature review for an article called “Assessing the Phonological Skills of Bilingual Children from Preschool through Kindergarten: Developmental Progression and Cross-Language Transfer” (Lopez, 2012) were:

Phonological awareness (includes a definition; remember to *define your terms*)

Phonological awareness theories

The role of phonological awareness in early literacy development

Phonological awareness in dual-language learners

The assessment of phonological awareness skills

Developing a new measure of phonological awareness (This was the purpose of the study)

3. **Look at the format of the manuscript.** Is the writing formulaic, for example, a preponderance of sentences that follow the format of “___’s (date) study found that...”? Are there lots of quotations? Are there many pages of unbroken text? Counteract these issues by varying sentence structures, reducing quoted material, using at least three levels of headings, and using tables or figures to summarize (for example, a table of major historical trends rather than ten pages about them). Use transitional phrases, such as those in Chap. 2, pp. 27–46 as signposts to guide the reader through the material.
4. **Critique others’ work.** In order to truly review research, you need to be sufficiently conversant with studies to discuss their contributions and limitations. If a study was exploratory and creative, yet lacked a sufficient sample size, say so. If three major theories emphasize different facets of a phenomenon, instead of going on and on about each, one by one, compare and contrast the three. If a body of the research has implications for future research, explain how you arrived at that conclusion and what those implications are. Remember that the word “review” literally means to see or look again.

Online Tool Refer to Richard Toracco’s (2011) “Writing an Integrative Literature Reviews: Guidelines and Examples”. http://docseminar2.wikispaces.com/file/view/Literature+review+paper_Torraco.pdf.

Evaluative Criteria

After a doctoral candidate shared Chap. 2 with her committee, all agreed that it was an exemplary review of the relevant literature. One committee member said, “While reading this, I felt as though I were being taken on a tour of a mansion with an exceptionally knowledgeable docent. The commentary followed the pathway of the tour and provided keen insights.” Taking this analogy one step further, a poorly written literature review is comparable to docents who have merely memorized

some information and repeat it each time they conduct a tour. They often are confounded by questions because they have surface knowledge rather than a deep understanding. In fact, they rely on memorization so much that pausing to answer a question can cause them to “lose their place” and get confused.

What characteristics distinguish high-quality reviews of the literature from those that are less so? In a fascinating study that “graded” dissertations (Lovitt, 2005), 272 faculty members in 74 departments across 10 disciplines at 9 research universities participated in focus groups that supplied descriptors for “outstanding”, “very good”, “acceptable”, and “unacceptable” dissertations. Collectively they had 6,129 years of experience, had chaired approximately 3,470 dissertations, and had served on 9,890 dissertation committees. In a nutshell, outstanding dissertations had the best literature reviews; they were characterized with statements such as: “exhibits mature, independent thinking,” “has a point of view and a strong, confident, independent, and authoritative voice,” “displays a deep understanding of a massive amount of complicated literature,” and “has a conceptual framework and shows a deep understanding of theory”. Merely acceptable dissertations that were “workmanlike” and “a chore to read”. So, how does an author progress to more sophisticated understandings of the work of reviewing? Table 5.4 highlights some of the comments about literature reviews based on Lovitt’s (2007) research.

Publishable Literature Reviews

When academic authors consider a strategy to guide them through the morass of ideas they have collected during a literature review, theory frequently falls far down the list. Yet the identification of a theoretical base may be the single, most helpful way to arrive at a unifying construct. Imagine that the world of knowledge is a huge country estate surrounded with scenic views on every side. Theory limits your perspective (something that you openly admit) by providing a particular vantage point. Just as it would be impossible to look out of every window in a mansion simultaneously, it is equally counter-productive to think of your theoretical base as all of the theories you have encountered during your coursework. Your theoretical base is the window you choose to gaze from in the house of big ideas. While you acknowledge that there are many possible views, this is the one you have selected to frame your perspective.

When dissertation committee members or peer reviewers of a manuscript refer to theoretical base, what they usually mean is that they expect the writer to identify a theory that is:

- Appropriate and relevant
- Logically interpreted
- Well understood (e.g., both in terms of strengths and limitations)
- Applied to the question

Table 5.4 “Grading” the literature review

Outstanding	Very good	Acceptable	Unacceptable
Is original, ambitious, brilliant, clear, coherent, compelling, concise, creative, elegant, engaging, interesting, insightful, persuasive, sophisticated, surprising, and thoughtful	Has some original ideas, insights, and observations, but is less original, significant, ambitious, interesting, and exciting than the outstanding category	Displays little creativity, imagination, or insight	Lacks careful thought
Is very well written and organized	Misses opportunities to completely explore interesting issues and connections	Is not interesting, exciting, or surprising	Does not understand or misses relevant literature
Synthesizes the literature well and is interdisciplinary	Makes a modest contribution to the field	Is pedestrian, plodding and a chore to read	Has a weak, inconsistent, self-contradictory, unconvincing, or invalid argument
Connects components in a seamless way	Is well written and organized	Contains an acceptable amount of solid work to show that the student can do research	Does not handle theory well, or theory is missing or wrong
Exhibits mature, independent thinking	Shows understanding and mastery of the subject matter	Tends to be highly derivative, often an extension of the adviser’s work	Has wrong, inappropriate, incoherent, or confused analysis
Argument is focused, logical, rigorous, and sustained	Has a strong, comprehensive, and coherent argument	Adds little to the field and lacks consequence	Has unsupported or exaggerated interpretation
Has a point of view and a confident, independent, and authoritative voice		Displays a narrow understanding of the field	Does not make a contribution
Displays a deep understanding of a massive amount of complicated literature		Does not critique the literature	
Conclusion ties the whole thing together		Fails to present an imaginative, complex, or convincing argument	
Is publishable in top-tier journals			

Theories that fulfill these criteria can serve as a “base of operations” for the investigation. A frequent response to the advice, “Find a theoretical base” is to think about the “grand” theories, those theories with at capital T that are found in virtually every textbook. Although grand theories would appear in the literature review for your dissertation (assuming that they are relevant), it is often the “small” theories that prove most useful in actually conducting the study.

Suppose, for example, that you have noticed that doctoral students express different levels of satisfaction with their dissertation committees and you see a study in there somewhere. For the inexperienced researcher, it would be common to flounder around, never getting past the topic stage. But suppose that instead you go on a quest to find a theoretical base. If you think that the dissertation advisor plays the pivotal role, you might check into a theory of mentor/protégé relationships. Perhaps, in conversations with students, you’ve noted that there appears to be a mismatch between some students and the doctoral programs in which they are enrolled (or abandon), so you go to the literature to seek out a theory on how graduate students choose a program. You may have noticed that the variables which lead to students’ satisfaction with doctoral programs are not all that different from other types of job satisfaction, so you begin your theoretical hunt there. The list could go on and on but the point is that, finding a useful theory is like getting your building permit before building a house. The construction can begin because theory is foundational.

The truth is that most research begins as a hunch. The trick is to get past the hunch stage, where your idea still sounds like a book report (e.g., “My study will be about...”). A major conceptual shift occurs when you transform a vague domain of interest into a workable plan. Once again, here’s where theory can help.

One of my former advisees had a hunch about Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) meetings. An IEP is a meeting at which the learning objectives for a child with disabilities are discussed and planned. Usually, the “regular” classroom teacher, special educators, administrators, and professionals from other fields (e.g., speech/language pathologists) participate. Her hunch was that the types of interprofessional interactions during these meetings affected the outcomes in important ways. It was not until she located sociological theories about the characteristics of effective collaboration and group dynamics that her study began to take shape. Likewise, if you wanted to study the phenomenon called a dissertation defense meeting, a topic search would yield very little. If, however, you think more in terms of how groups of professionals in committees render decisions about applicants’ or candidates’ performances, a host of methods will emerge. It may be a “big T” theory, such as group dynamics, or, it could be a “small t” theory, such as a conceptual model of a particular decision-making process from a qualitative study. For instance, what process is used to decide which universities will receive a major grant? How do Fortune 500 companies select CEOs? When book publishers review proposals, how do they decide who gets a contract? How do committees choose superintendents for school districts? Each of these important decisions requires collective professional judgment and published research on any of them would be based on a theory. One of those theories could serve as a guide in studying the particular type of decision-making that interests you.

Searching for theoretical links across disciplines and topics can stimulate your thinking, reveal the interrelatedness of knowledge, offer numerous examples of how to proceed, and make your study more innovative. Best of all, virtually every piece of research concludes with a “cheat sheet” of recommendations for further research. These ideas from more experienced researchers can lead you to consider other theoretical bases and methodological directions for the particular dissertation you have in mind. A theoretical base, far from being a waste of time, is a time saver. Settling down with a useful theory puts you in the window seat of that metaphorical mansion, serenely gazing out one window, seeing things from a particular vantage point. After you combine that theoretical perspective with the literature review, you can begin to fashion a conceptual framework. “The language of theory, in fact, often stands like parentheses at either end of academic research reports: a theoretical framework is proposed at the beginning and a theoretical discussion synthesizes findings and their significance at the end” (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997, p. 225).

Activity 5.5: Using Reviews to Build a Conceptual Framework

As Ravitch and Riggan (2012) suggest, the best quality reviews yield a conceptual framework that serves a “guide and a ballast”.

1. *Identify your interests, beliefs, and motivations* for doing research with questions such as: Why do I find this interesting? What is my motivation for engaging in this research? What sources have informed my hunches? What concerns, hopes, and expectations do I have for this research?
2. *Examine the “conversations already happening”* with questions such as: What are the major arguments, positions, tensions, overlaps, and intersections in different fields on this subject? What are the methodological limitations and weaknesses in what has been produced thus far? Is the perspective of a group excluded or marginalized? As I read recommendations for future research from other scholars, where might the research need to go next? How might the work that I’ve planned make a contribution? (p. 149)

Online Tool Watch the Central Queensland University (Australia) tutorial on the work of reviewing with video clips at <http://libguides.library.cqu.edu.au/litreview>.

Two former editors of the American Education Research Association publication, *Reviews of Educational Research*, used the metaphor of a stone wall to explain what makes a literature review publishable. They say that the scholarly literature

is like a wall that is built one stone at a time, each stone filling a hole previously unfilled, each one mortared and connected to those that came before and after it, each one providing a support for the subsequent ones, and each one being supported by those that came before...The review article attempts to describe the wall itself and to discover its mortar, its

architecture, and design; the wall's place in the architecture of the larger structure; its relation to the other elements in the structure; its significance, purpose, and meaning in the larger structure. (Murray & Rath, 1994, p. 197)

Publishable reviews also have a narrative quality (Merriam, 2009): they tell a “good story” “about a mature body of literature” (Murray & Rath, 1994, p. 199, p. 417).

Activity 5.6: Criteria for a Publishable Review of the Literature

Identify a student paper or other unpublished literature review that you have written.

Locate a published review in a peer-reviewed outlet such as a professional journal or a research yearbook or handbook. The publication *Reviews of Educational Research*, published by the American Educational Research Association, offers many excellent examples.

Compare/contrast your paper with this manuscript in terms of:

- Evidence of a theoretical base
- Use of organizing principles that reflect synthesis (i.e., themes, patterns, strands)
- Thoroughness (e.g., searching the related literature in other fields)
- Discussion of criteria for inclusion/exclusion of studies and authoritative nature of sources
- Presentation of a logical argument signaled by headings
- Use of transitional words and phrases to indicate shifts in content
- Analysis and critique of research that identifies strengths and weaknesses
- Use of concise, specific examples to illustrate key points
- Description of the “landscape” of the topic, issue, or controversy in a readable, engaging, and narrative style
- Statements about implications that demonstrate how the work represents a stride forward and an original contribution

Additional Resources on Writing Literature Reviews

Aveyard, H. (2011). *Doing a literature review in health and social care: A practical guide*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press/McGraw Hill.

Baumeister, R. F. (2003). Writing a literature review. In M. J. Prinstein & M. D. Patterson (Eds.), *The portable mentor: Expert guide to a successful career in psychology* (pp. 57–71). New York, NY: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.

Fink, A. (2009). *Conducting research literature reviews: From the internet to paper*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Galvan, J. L. (2006). *Writing literature reviews: A guide for student of the social and behavioral sciences* (3rd ed.). Glendale: Pyczak Publishing.

Jesson, J. K. (2011). *Doing your literature review: Traditional and systematic techniques*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Randolph, J. J. (2009). A guide to writing the dissertation literature review. *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation*, 14(13), 1–13.

Reuber, A. R. (2011). Strengthening your literature review. *Family Business Review*, 23(2), 105–108.

Ridley, D. (2008). *The literature review: A step-by-step guide for students*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Online Tool Read Chap. 2, “Turning Your Coursework into Articles” by Alaric Hall posted at: http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_41223_en.pdf.

The Position Paper

Position papers or statements typically are written about controversial issues. At some point during your university career, you probably were asked to write a position paper. In many respects, it is similar to a debate because it presents different perspectives on an issue and makes the writer’s stance on the topic clear.

Online Tool

See Simon Fraser University’s basic guide to writing position papers <http://www.sfu.ca/cmns/130d1/WritingaPositionPaper.htm>.

In Academia, position papers

- Are detailed statements supported by research
- Have a scholarly voice and formal tone
- Focus on a single issue
- Take a stand on a topic of importance to the discipline
- Articulate a viewpoint and/or policy
- Lend authoritative support to members of the group seeking to implement best practices

Position papers often are used by professional organizations to represent their stand on a controversy. Whether position papers are written by a single author or a panel of experts, they will be peer reviewed by a diverse group of professionals to ensure that the statements made can be endorsed by the organization. It can be particularly daunting to get critical reviews and recommendations from a dozen or more experts in the field on a manuscript—some of which is conflicting. Many times, responding to such feedback first requires a “review of the reviews” in order to provide direction for rewrites. Position papers have an important function in Academia. In contrast to the common disclaimers made in the media (e.g., “the views and opinions expressed during this broadcast are those of the speakers and do not reflect the official policy or position of the network”), a position paper *does*

attempt to set policy and reflect the position of the organization on an important issue.

Online Tool Check out Study Guides and Strategies for advice on how to write a position paper at <http://www.studygs.net/wrtstr9.htm>.

Examples of Position Papers

- The National Council of Teachers of English, Conference on College Composition and Communication (4 Cs), “Writing Assessment: A Position Statement” Available: <http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/writingassessment>
- A national EDPRESS award winner in the category of Learned Article “Beyond Benchmarks and Scores: Reasserting the Role of Motivation and Interest in Children’s Academic Achievement” (Jalongo, 2007) available at <http://www.acei.org/images/stories/motivation.pdf>
- National Association of School Psychologists’ (2011) Position Statement “Grade Retention and Social Promotion”. Available http://www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/positionpapers/GradeRetentionandSocialPromotion.pdf

Investigate the position papers and statements that have been published in your field. As you participate in professional organizations, seek out opportunities to participate in writing these important documents, either as an individual or as a member of a committee.

Literature Reviews from Dissertation Chapters

Without a doubt, the task of converting a voluminous Chap. 2 of the traditional dissertation into a concise journal article represents a challenge (Foster, 2009). The endeavor also surfaces as a possibility at a time when the writer is not necessarily well-equipped to undertake it because he or she is so close to the existing document that it is difficult to take a step back and determine what is essential versus what is peripheral. Activity 5.7 offers a questioning framework that can assist dissertation writers.

Activity 5.7: Mining Chap. 2 for a Review Article

The metaphor of “mining” is used here because, just as prospectors toss away much of the material to search for precious metals or gems, writers of dissertations need to do likewise and to arrive at a concise review of the literature article (or book chapter). Some strategies for stripping away the nonessential include: (1) What is the focus of the review? What definitive themes have emerged? (2) What

is the most current/relevant supporting literature? Can some of long lists of citations be cut? (3) Is this information essential in order for readers to understand the manuscript or is it peripheral to the focus? (3) Would the audience be likely to know some of this information already? (4) Could reference to the published reviews of others take the place of building background? (5) What clear purpose does the review serve for readers? Will it save them time? Be immediately applicable to their work? Bring them up-to-date on a recent trend/issue? (6) Is there any place where the words bog down? Can you delete paragraphs, sentences, phrases and words?

Conclusion

As this chapter has discussed, a high-quality literature review is much more than kneading together a handful of sources to produce the typical graduate student paper. The simple truth is that, despite all of those papers and projects completed during graduate study, you may not have amassed that much practice in writing a review that meets the standards for a publishable review. Students sometimes respond to this observation with consternation and ask, “Why didn’t somebody teach me this earlier?” What they fail to recognize is that the work of reviewing is a complex, developmental task. Just as a child cannot skip over learning to read and immediately achieve a fifth-grade reading level, it is not possible to dramatically accelerate the process of learning to review. When you first begin reviewing, the emphasis is on becoming familiar with leaders in the field and learning how to cite and write for academic purposes. Becoming an expert and producing a publishable review of the literature requires several important things: (1) full immersion in the literature, (2) a mental “landscape” of the field, (3) a talent for organizing ideas and marshaling evidence, and (4) the academic writing skills to guide readers through the sequence without confusing them along the way. Be aware also that readers, reviewers and editors of scholarly publications want to know “what you think of the literature, its strengths as well as its weaknesses, whether or not it constitutes a major breakthrough in the thinking on the topic, what it adds to the knowledge base, and so on” (Merriam, 1998, p. 55).

Whether you are a graduate student or a widely published professional, there is always more to learn about the work of reviewing. Ideally, a review of the literature uses a collection of carefully selected sources to arrive “big picture” understandings of a topic that will advance thinking. There is an art to reviewing that novices do not yet recognize. A beautifully written review is more like a landscape painting than a still life because it takes a point of view (Reuber, 2011), presents a coherent composition (Notar & Cole, 2010), reveals the contours of the field, portrays those areas that are illuminated and those that remain in the shadows, and invites the readers to

place themselves in the picture. Reviewers are motivated by the desire “to be of use” (Lather, 1999) and to further readers’ understandings of the “body of knowledge” (BoK), defined as the cumulative, research-supported knowledge achieved by “building on each other’s [research] results” (Iivari, Hirschheim, & Klein, 2004, p. 314). As with a landscape painting, one major contribution of an expert, published literature review is to support readers in getting the “the lay of the land” on a topic of significance in their fields.