

Online Writing Center Principles and Procedures for Writing a Literature Review

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Table of Contents

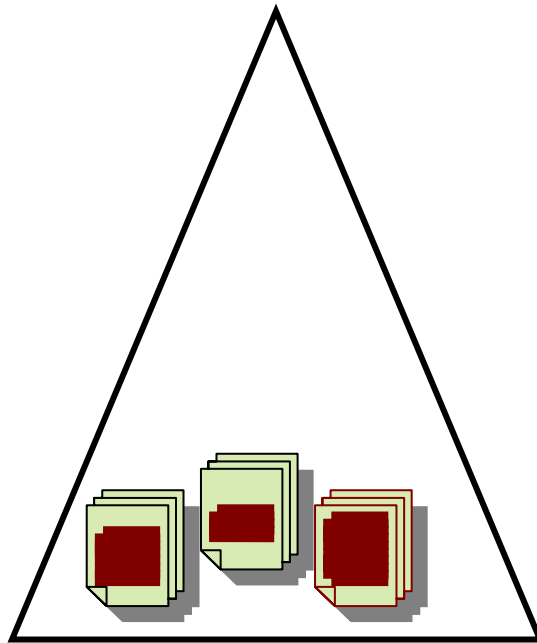
Principles and Procedures for Writing a Literature Review.....	3
Introduction: The Purpose of a Literature Review.....	3
Defining the Literature Review.....	5
Placement of a Literature Review in the Academic Conversation.....	5
Crafting the Literature Review.....	7
Goals of the Literature Review.....	7
Tools for Showing Synthesis in the Body Paragraph of the Literature Review.....	7
<i>Definitions.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Examples.....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Acknowledging the Critics.....</i>	<i>9</i>
Applying the Tools to the Literature Review.....	10
The Writing Process for the Literature Review.....	11
References.....	12

Principles and Procedures for Writing a Literature Review

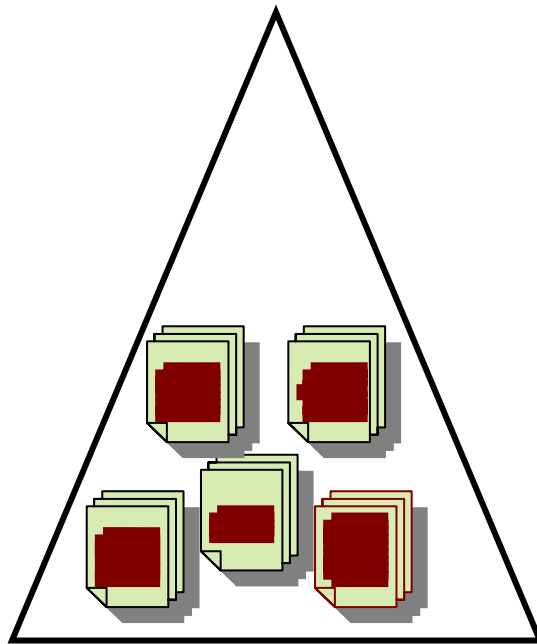
Introduction – The Purpose of a Literature Review

Entering an academic conversation involves many steps. Two of the most fundamental of these steps involves reading material in the field and forming a perspective on what you read. Academics demonstrate their perspective on the reading of the field by composing a literature review. A literature review traces the genealogy of a topic in the field; it notes the history of the topic and the notable perspectives of others in the field who have addressed the topic. The purpose of a literature review is to “demonstrate that the *writer* has insightfully and critically surveyed relevant literature on his or her topic in order to convince an intended *audience* that this *topic* is worth addressing” (Clark, 2007, p.105). The literature review is not intended to report the literature, but instead to synthesize it.

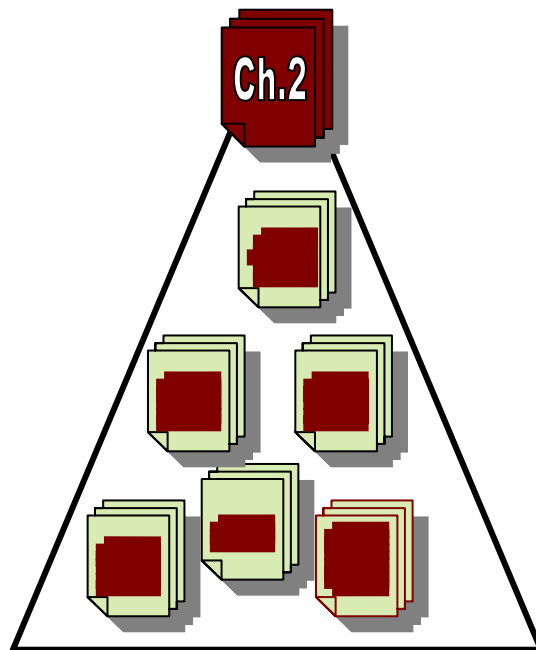
The literature review appears at many stages of your graduate education. Early in a graduate education, you will often be required to write a short literature review for a paper in a course to demonstrate analysis, synthesis, and evaluation¹ of the assigned readings for the course.



The expectations for the literature review increase steadily throughout a doctoral program,



finally culminating in a chapter-length literature review, which functions as the second chapter of the dissertation.



How do you prepare to write informed reviews of the literature in your field?

First, you must spend considerable time reading the academic literature of the field. Over time, you explore many topics through reading these academic sources, which include books, journal articles, and published studies and any other credible materials that work to add to the knowledge of your field. This ‘reading time’ constitutes the majority of your time in graduate school. The more you read, the more you begin to form an individual identity as a scholar through the choices you make as you read.

At the beginning of your graduate career, you read the materials that your course assignments guide you to in the library. However, over time, you start to recognize the names of authors with whom you’ve agreed in the past. You also start to recognize the names of authors with whom you’ve disagreed in the past. You become familiar with journal names and publisher names, and you can start to research a topic based on more than the key words listed in the assignment. Through continued reading in your field, you gain the experience to make informed choices about which authors to align yourself within the formation of your own academic identity.

Increased knowledge through reading comes through experience with multiple research projects, and that increasing knowledge also serves to shape your individual perspective on your own field of study. Over time, you focus your attention on a specific research area, and, ultimately, on a specialty area in which you will conduct research to complete a dissertation. Making these kinds of decisions about where you’ll conduct further research and writing marks your entry into the field as an individual scholar drawn to some topics and not persuaded by others.

Defining the Literature Review

Placement of a Literature Review in Academic Conversation

A graduate education anticipates learners making choices and forming an individual identity as a scholar. Assignments requiring literature reviews are some of the touchstones in a graduate education that allow you to identify your individual voice and stance on important topics within a field. A graduate education culminates in the writing of a dissertation, your official entry into the academic conversation through the completion of a book-length project that advances the knowledge of the field. In a shorter, paper-length form, your literature review typically consists of several paragraphs placed early in the text to explain the history of the problem or issue and to explore what the field has said on the topic. The literature review establishes a context, a history, and a reason for why you are writing. You will also be asked to write paper-length literature reviews in which the review is a much more developed examination of the literature on a particular topic in the field. These literature reviews, short and long, culminate in a chapter-length literature review that serves to underpin your dissertation research.

At Capella, the disciplines of Business, Education, Human Services, and Psychology structure the dissertation in the following way:

1. Introduction and problem statement
2. **Literature review**
3. Research and methodology
4. Data analysis and results
5. Conclusions and recommendations

Notice the placement of the literature review. In the context of a dissertation, the literature review comes immediately after the introduction. In the introduction, you give a picture of what the dissertation will do and what the dissertation will address, much as the first paragraph of an academic paper offers an introduction and a thesis statement that will guide the body of the paper. As with all literature reviews, Chapter 2, the literature review, establishes a context, a history, and a reason for the project.

This early placement of the literature review is important for several reasons.

- The literature review *offers a critical look at existing research that's significant to the writer's topic.*
- The literature review *demonstrates the writer's knowledge of the field.*
- The literature review *justifies the writer's proposed study.*
- The literature review *sets the context for the research.*
- The literature review *defines which issues and authors are important to the writer and which are not.*

Thus, the literature review defines you as a writer and a scholar in the field. Readers can learn what you value and what you don't by reading your review. In the literature review, you choose to include some sources while choosing not to include others. These choices offer a lot of information about who you are as a scholar for an audience familiar with the research in your field. For example, imagine that you are writing about educational theories. John Dewey serves as your foundational source for your literature review. You read two scholars who come after Dewey: Paolo Freire and Malcolm Knowles. You speak favorably about what Knowles adds to Dewey's ideas, but you note several shortcomings in Freire's assumptions. From those statements, readers in your field understand that you are aligned with the Knowles school of thought and not with the Freirian school of thought. Readers can also place what you value within the context of their own perspectives and within the larger issues of the field.

In academic writing, the primary audience, readers in the field, works to situate new voices within the already-existing conversation. This audience will evaluate which sources you use in the context of their own perspectives—their own established identity in the academic conversation. Just as you have your individual perspective on the topic for which you are composing a literature review, so will your audience. That's why the literature review is so important. In short, your literature review defines where you stand in the academic conversation of your field within the context of those who came before you and for those who will come after you.

Crafting the Literature Review

Goals of the Literature Review

For a literature review to be accepted as a credible representation of your understanding of your field, it must accomplish several goals.

- The literature review *must be organized around and related directly to research questions that you are developing.*
- The literature review *must synthesize results into a summary of what's known and not known.*
- The literature review *must identify areas of controversy in the literature.*
- The literature review *must formulate questions that need further research.*

In the following instructional module, you'll work with three tools to help you craft a literature review that accomplishes all of these goals. Whether you are writing a short literature review within a paper or Chapter 2 of your dissertation, these tools will assist you in synthesizing your readings to compose reviews that give your readers a clear understanding of the issues and scholars that you are reviewing and will outline your stance on the position.

Tools for Showing Synthesis in the Body Paragraphs of the Literature Review – Definition, Examples, and Acknowledging the Critics

Three basic tools will help you share your synthesis of the literature you read with your audience: **definitions, examples, and acknowledging your critics.**

Definitions

Definitions bolster your argument by making sure that you and the reader are starting on the same page and with the same definitions. Definitions can be derived from multiple sources, from dictionaries to reference books to seminal works in a field.

For example, if your topic is the color blue, you might rely on a reputable art dictionary to define what blue means in terms of the color spectrum. You might also rely on a book of literary criticism to enhance that definition by looking at how the color blue has historically been used to symbolize courage in great western literature, including Shakespeare. Combining these two definitions gives you a definition of your own for the color blue in the context of your specific topic--of your unique argument.

When using key words and concepts in the field for your literature review, remember that over time, terms and concepts gather many meanings. Simply relying on a dictionary definition might not be enough to define a term for your audience, a group of academics in your field. For example, *unconscious* is a term that has many meanings in the field of psychology. That term means different things to, say, Sigmund Freud than it does to those who come after him, like, for example, Jacques LaCan. Therefore, in a literature review about psychoanalytic theories with an academic audience, it will be important to talk about which scholar you

follow, which definition of that term you agree with, and how you will apply that definition to your own theory.

You can also use definitions to define a concept or topic by what it is not.

For example, if you follow LaCan's definition of the unconscious, you might want to include Freud's definition to show where it differs from LaCan's. You will also want to offer specific reasons to justify why those differences prompted you to side with LaCan's definition.

Remember: definitions can be used to define both what something is and what it is not.

Examples

Examples bolster your argument by adding an extra level of explanation for the reader.

Examples often serve to make a concept concrete for the reader. Imagine that you are trying to explain a method for teaching. After the key terms in the method are defined, take the next step: offering examples of the method at work.

Notice the pattern of examples in the section you just read above on definitions:

Definitions can be derived from multiple sources, from dictionaries to reference books to seminal works in a field.

***For example,** if your topic is the color blue, you might rely on a reputable art dictionary to define what blue means in terms of the color spectrum.*

Simply relying on a dictionary definition might not be enough to define a term for your audience, a group of academics in your field.

***For example,** unconscious is a term that has many meanings in the field of psychology. That term means different things to, say, Sigmund Freud than it does to those who come after him, like, for example, Jacques LaCan.*

You can also use definitions to define a concept or topic by what it is not.

***For example,** if you follow LaCan's definition of the unconscious, you might want to include Freud's definition to show where it differs from LaCan's and why those differences don't offer a definition that works within the context of your argument.*

In these examples, a statement is made, and that statement is then applied—'teased out'—by the use of examples. Examples, either hypothetical or from the literature, bring your synthesis to life by offering real-life connections to your theories and interpretations. As a Capella scholar-practitioner, connecting theory to practice underpins your educational journey, and examples are an excellent and primary method for making that theory-to-practice connection.

Remember: examples can be used to enhance definitions and to give the reader another perspective on your evaluative statements made during the literature review.

Acknowledging the Critics

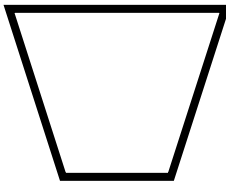
While many in your audience will agree with your position on the topic of your literature review, many will not. An important function of the literature review is to **acknowledge what critics of your argument say**. To create an informed perspective about the literature of a field, you must read many perspectives about key issues and discussions within your field. In an academic conversation, a writer who has looked at all sides of the argument comes across as an informed and balanced speaker. Just as working to define something by what it is not is an effective tool, so is presenting a position on a subject and including the perspectives and arguments that differ from that position.

For example, let's say that you make the statement that many in your field have conjectured that the sky is blue. You define blue in terms of meteorology, and you give examples of what you mean by the color blue. During your research, you discover many speakers who say that the sky is not blue. Some of these speakers are not credible, so you discard those dissenting positions. But some of those speakers are credible. They are published in peer-reviewed journals, and they have many followers at universities across the country. Leaving those credible sources out of your literature review creates a slanted perspective on the body of literature in the field, while acknowledging those critics shows that you have considered all perspectives, but for at least one reason, you have decided to reject those critics in favor of your chosen perspective.

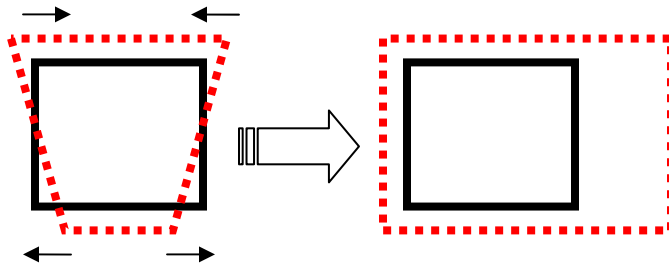
Acknowledging the critics also offers you the chance to create new ways of thinking about your topic within your field. For example, imagine that you address the way in which two different scholars, Scholar A and Scholar B, use a shape to discuss a concept in the field. You note that Scholar A and those after him have conjectured that the term 'square' is effective for describing a concept that encompasses four terms.



You also acknowledge that Scholar B has conjectured that the term 'square,' which implies that all four sides are equal in length, is too limiting, and, thus, must be changed to the term 'quadrangle.'



While you acknowledge the validity of Scholar B's purpose in expanding the term, you also note that in the context of the concept being discussed, all angles in Scholar B's conception are actually 90 degree angles. In fact, then, in spite the difference in terms, both scholars are really talking about a similar concept. In essence, from your perspective, Scholar B supports Scholar A's assertion, but with a different definition of square, which, perhaps, you re-label as "rectangle."



In this example, noting the other side of the argument has led you to a new understanding of the concept addressed by both Scholars A and B. While acknowledging the critic shows depth of exposure to the literature of the field, in this case, that acknowledgement has also led to a new interpretation not yet noted by your field, filling a gap in the field while boosting your credibility as a new voice entering the field.

The review of the literature you create with definitions, examples, and your acknowledgement of critics is your synthesis of the literature of your field. You will not just be summarizing the literature, but instead, finding connections through tools like the ones described here. When you finish organizing and drafting it, this synthesis becomes a persuasive argument which creates the context in which your readers will understand your research.

Applying the Tools to the Literature Review

Now that you've explored the tools, you are ready to apply them to a literature review in your field.

Once you've selected your literature review, work to locate the definitions, examples, and acknowledgement of the critics used by the author. As you read your sample literature review, make notes in the margins, and locate where the writer has used the tools you've learned in this module. You may also want to highlight each example in a different color. For example, you may mark definitions in blue, examples in green, and acknowledging the critics in red.

Once you've completed this process, ask yourself the following questions.

Which definitions worked well? Why?

Which definitions could have worked better? How?

Which definitions convinced you because they came from credible sources? Why?

Which definitions did not convince you due to lack of credibility of the source? Why?

Which examples worked well? Why?

Which examples could have worked better? How?

Which examples convinced you because they came from credible sources? Why?

Which examples did not convince you due to lack of credibility of the source? Why?

Which acknowledgments of critics worked well? Why?

Which acknowledgments of critics could have worked better? How?

Which acknowledgement of critics convinced you because they came from credible sources? Why?

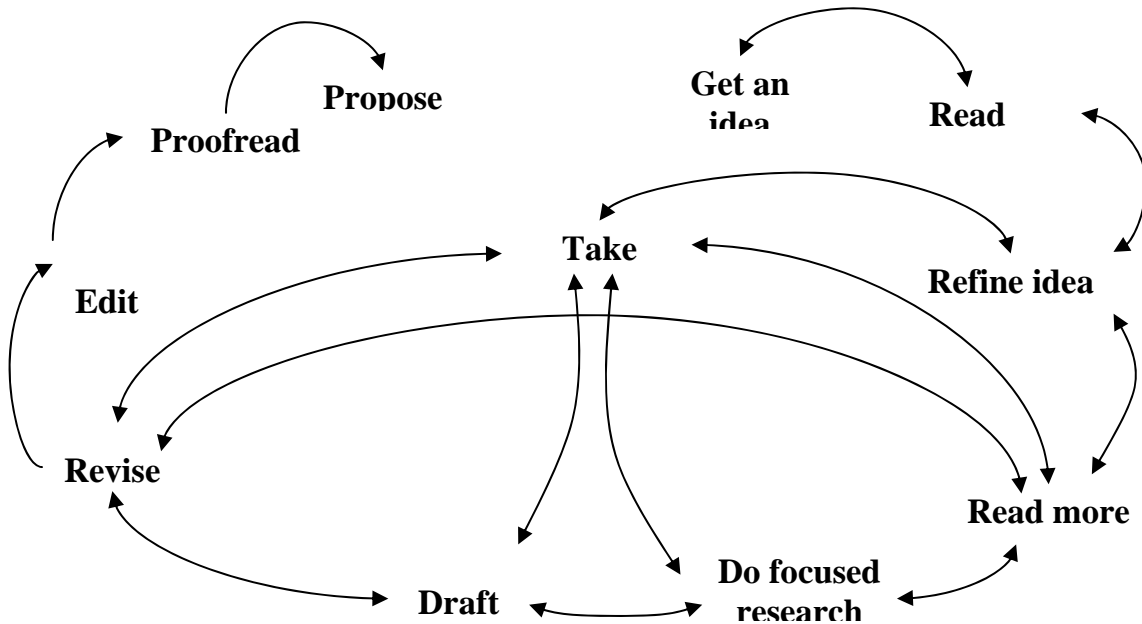
Which acknowledgments of critics did not convince you due to lack of credibility of the source? Why?

For all three tools, as you identify them and question their effectiveness, work to find methods that you might want to use in your own literature reviews.

Do you see methods of incorporating these tools that you'd like to model in your own review? Note what you like and what you don't like in these examples. You can often learn as much about your own writing process by charting what you don't like as you can learn by charting what you like. Remember: the literature reviews posted above were deemed successful Chapter 2 literature reviews for Capella dissertations, so applying the tools to these reviews gives you practice with the dissertation standards for Capella.

The Writing Process for the Literature Review

Like any academic writing process, crafting an effective literature review is not a linear process. As the writing map below indicates, the literature review writing process is recursive and iterative.



Reminders

Upon your completion of each draft in this recursive process, remember to compare the following important outcomes of the literature review to ensure that your review satisfies the expectations of your audience.

- Reviews background of the problem area
- Identifies merits of previous studies (who, what, when, where, why, how)

For the dissertation project:

- Helps to select research methods
 - Provides required theoretical framework
 - Establishes context and rationale for the study
 - Establishes that study does not unintentionally duplicate work already published
 - Shows how your study contributes to the knowledge base of the field
-

References

Clark, I. L. (2007). *Writing the successful thesis and dissertation: Entering the conversation*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.