

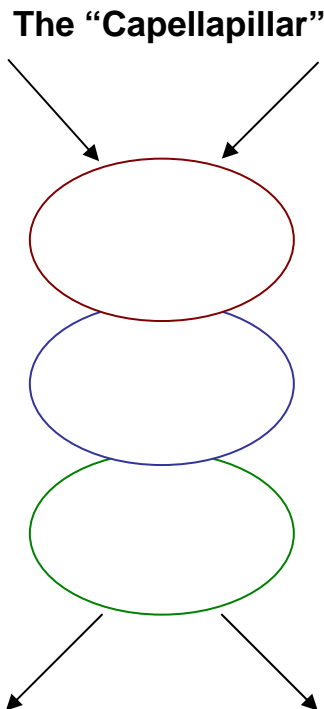
## Locating Common Themes in a Literature Review

Writing a literature review in your field is one of the most helpful things you'll learn to do as a graduate learner. Every time you write a lit review, you gather, gain, and synthesize ideas within your field; by doing so, you add to the depth of your knowledge. Moreover, as you learn more about what has already been said by other scholars, you'll see new places to enter the conversation.

Literature reviews typically come early in academic papers. This position lets them do their best work: first, orienting the reader to the established knowledge about the issue you're writing on, and second, positioning *your* ideas within that body of knowledge. Once you have explained your understanding of the field to a reader, you are in position to address those ideas in your own right. A clear and understandable literature review is a great lead-in to a clear and understandable research paper that reflects *your* ideas.

Of course, those ideas originate, at least in some form, from your process of selecting and reading academic writing. Once you have located your readings, your real heavy lifting begins. For the readings to be helpful, you must find a way to read, understand, and connect them. Reading and retaining all of the information in your head may seem overwhelming—and very often, it is. Instead of keeping track of your ideas this way, we recommend you experiment with a variety of tools and strategies that will help you organize your notes, focus your thinking, and streamline the reading and writing process.

The “Capellapillar” is an easy tool to use, providing visual and cognitive reference points for you as you shape and organize your thoughts and ideas.

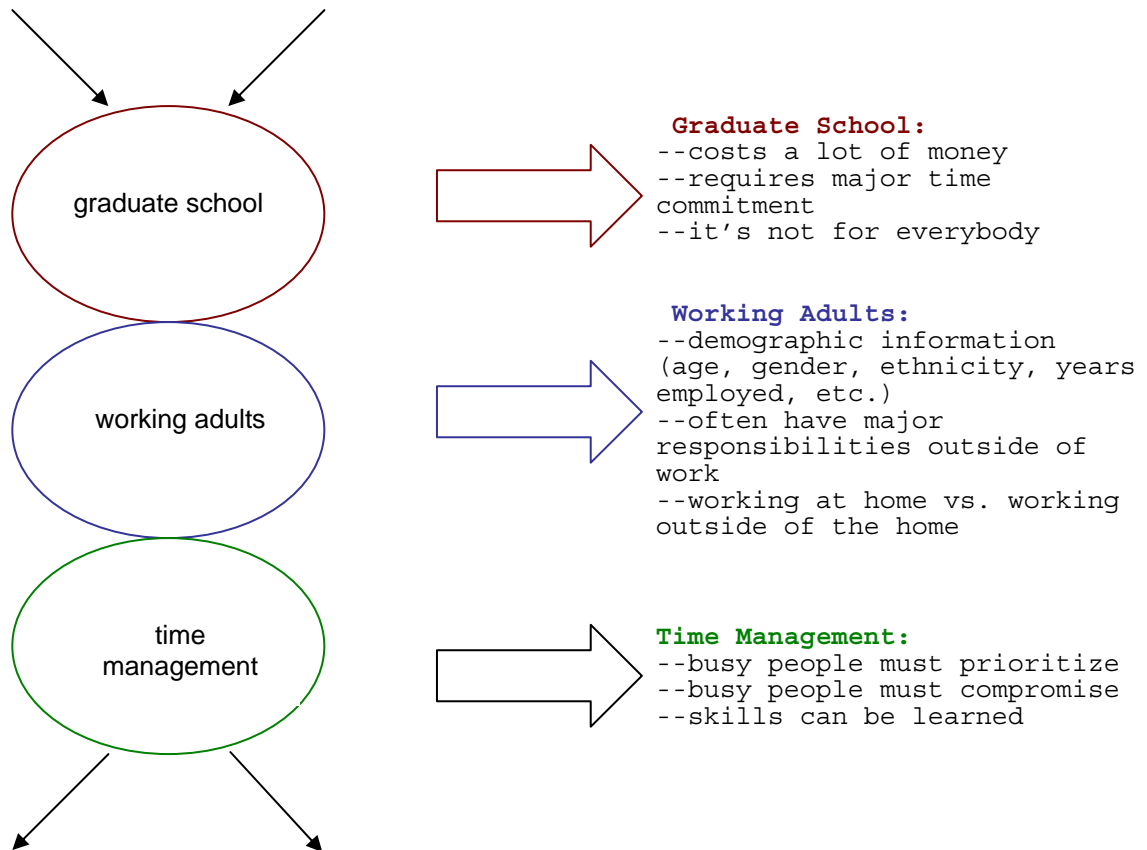


The concept is simple. First, you read an article and take notes. We recommend that you as you read you pay attention to four things: main ideas, definitions of terms, examples (or evidence) for the main ideas, and statements or ideas with which you disagree (or “arguable statements”). Once you’ve read and understand the article, translate your notes into a Capellapillar: Find three main ideas (or themes)

from the article and list one in each “section” of the Capellapillar’s body. Next to these sections, list definitions, examples, and/or debatable statements related to each of the three themes. That’s it!

A completed Capellapillar might look like this:

Smith, D. 2005. The Demands of Graduate School on Working Adults. The Journal of Studies on the Difficulties of Graduate School, 1 (1), 37-52.

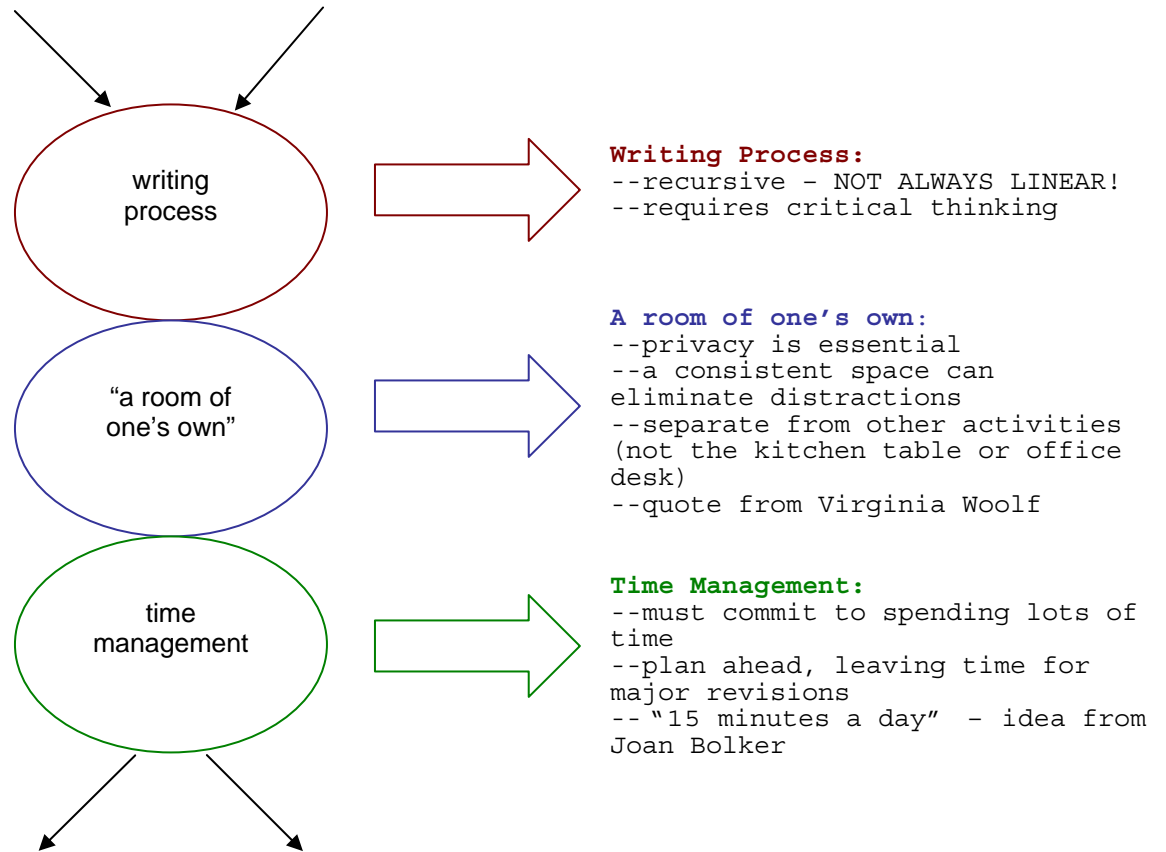


The purpose here is to track as much information as is useful to you. This isn’t an exact science—you may have more than three themes or ideas to work with, you may only find two pieces of evidence, and so on. Your goal isn’t to find three of everything, but to find enough information that a) you know you understand the primary components of the reading, and b) you are able to connect those primary components to other readings. So fill in what you can, and prepare to move on to the next article. At this point, you are making progress in the reading and thinking that will form the basis and focus of your literature review, and you have divided your sources into manageable pieces.

Now, when you move to the next reading, you can use the ideas or themes from the first article as “lenses” through which you read. For example, once you have read Smith’s article and you are focused on graduate school, time management and working adults, you can begin the next article keyed into those same things. Read this second article just as you did the first, taking notes and reacting to the reading. You may or not find similar themes; if you *do* find similar themes, you will likely find that each writer approaches those themes from a different perspective or with different information.

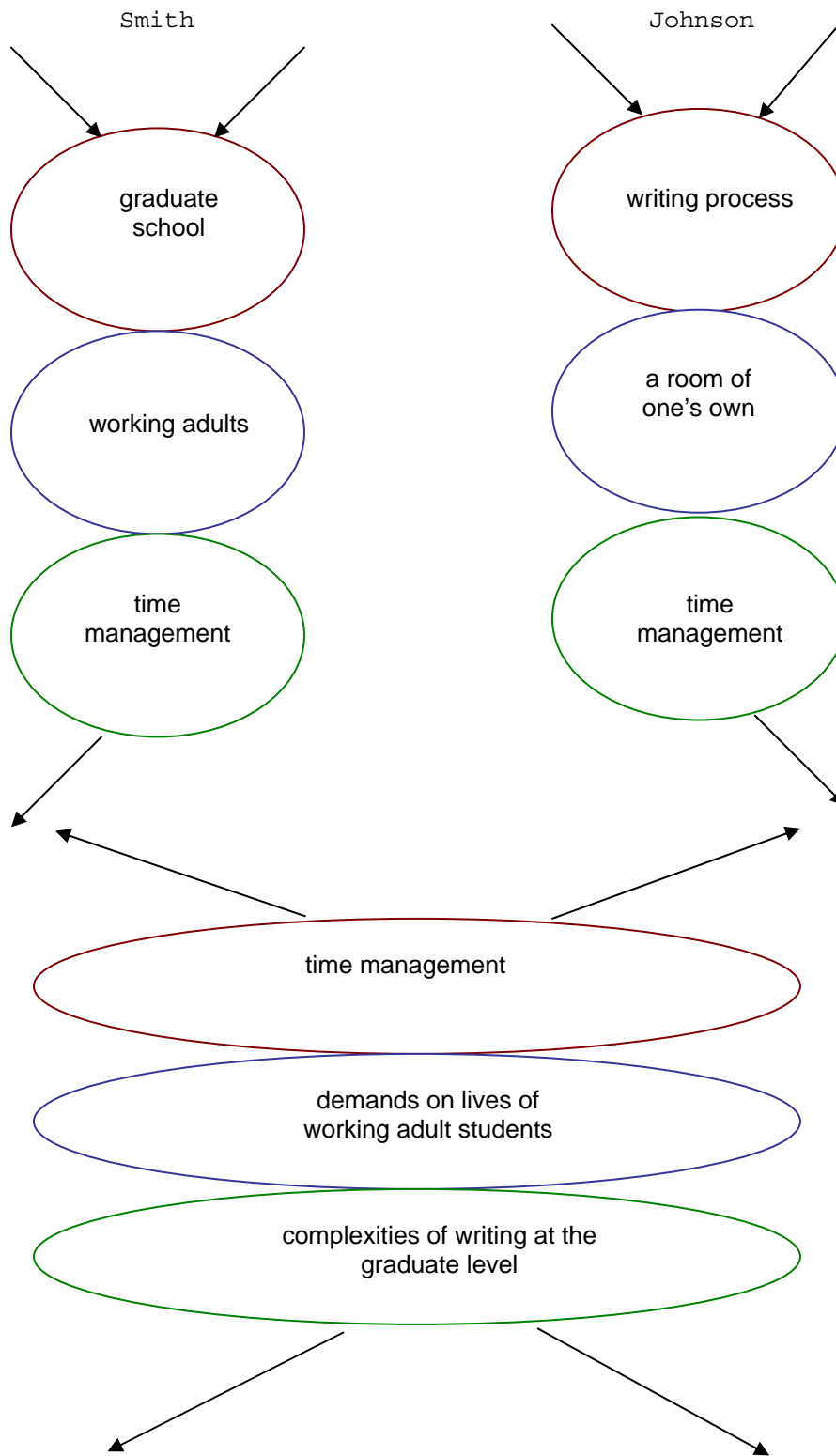
After you finish reading and annotating the second article, stop and complete a second Capellipillar:

Johnson, J. 2004. Academic Writing: Trials and Travails. Writing Rocks! 17, 15-28.



Before you move to the third reading, stop and look through both Capellipillars. Do you see any recurring themes or ideas? If not, no problem. If so, keep them in mind as you read and take notes on your third reading. When you're done, complete a third Capellipillar. At this point, you'll have three individual Capellipillars, and you'll be ready to move on to the next stage.

You now have three Capellipillars outlining themes and evidence from your readings. See what common themes are present in all three articles, and consolidate the individual Capellipillars into one that merges three important themes shared in the articles. (The example below uses just two Capellipillars, but the principal is the same.)



me: now I'm ready to enter the conversation

Remember that this exercise is only a tool to help you organize and synthesize material as you read. You may find that you love it and use it every time you read, or that you never use it again. Even if you don't use the tool, however, you'll still want to read carefully and take good notes on what you read so that you can find another way to track that important information. With the Capellapillar, you have essentially generated a kind of data warehouse: lists of ideas and arguments, charts of important themes and evidence, and points of synthesis that show where points within articles merge. You have charted a path of synthesized ideas that tracks *your* reading and thinking; moreover, you've done it in a manageable time frame that is easy to reference. From an even broader perspective, you have made choices about what is and is not important in the literature pertaining to your topic, and those choices have positioned you to write about those connections for an academic audience. Those choices are your voice in the academic conversation.