

# The Literature Review

Making Sense of Sources

# What is a literature review?



- ▶ Discusses published information on a topic/subject area by accredited scholars and researchers
- ▶ Purpose:
  - ▶ to convey to your reader what knowledge and ideas have been established on a topic
  - ▶ what their strengths and weakness are

# Why is it important?

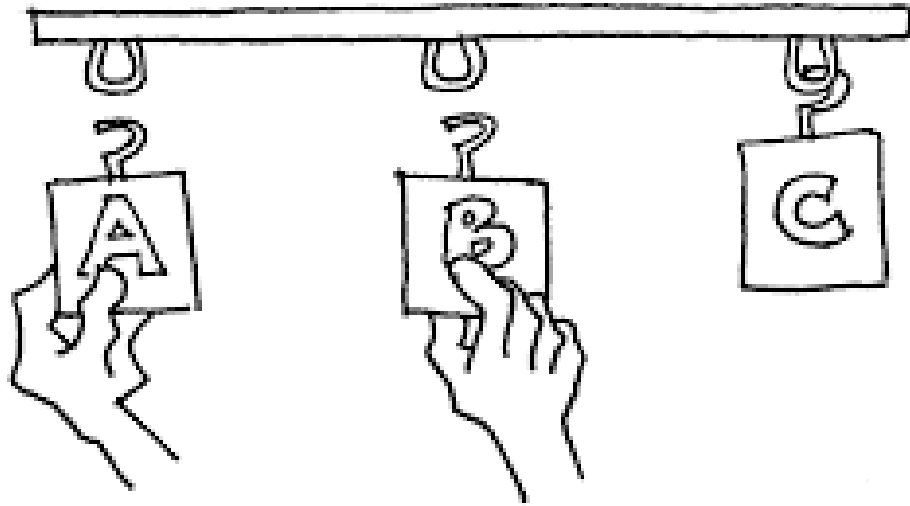
- ▶ Sometimes professors may have you write a literature review simply so you can get a grasp on the research that has been done
- ▶ Furthermore, a literature review is often written before writing a research paper. By determining the gaps in the research, you can decide what you'd like to do your own research on.

# Not a summary or research paper

- ▶ Not a list of material available
- ▶ Not a summary of the article
- ▶ DOES NOT develop new arguments
- ▶ DOES Combines both summary and synthesis of ideas

# A literature review must do the following:

- ▶ Be organized around and related directly to the thesis/research question you are developing
- ▶ Recaps important information of the source (Combines new and older interpretations)
- ▶ Synthesize results into a summary of what is and is not known
- ▶ Identify areas of controversy in the literature
- ▶ Might evaluate sources and advise reader(s) of most relevant sources
- ▶ Formulate questions that need further research



First Things First

# Clarify your assignment



- ▶ How many sources do you need to include?
- ▶ What types of sources? Books, journal articles, websites?
- ▶ Summarize or synthesize or critique by issue or theme?
- ▶ To evaluate or not to evaluate?
- ▶ Do you need to add subheadings, background information, definitions, history?

# What does synthesis/synthesizing mean?

- ▶ Purpose: to draw conclusion about findings in literature so that you can identify how the literature addresses your research question
- ▶ The ability to combine elements of several sources to help you make a point
- ▶ The ability to infer relationships among sources and make judgements
- ▶ Process:
  - ▶ Gather literature that addresses your topic/research question
  - ▶ Review literature and take notes
    - ▶ Describe
    - ▶ Summarize
    - ▶ Analyze
    - ▶ Identify key concepts and terms
  - ▶ Synthesize literature
    - ▶ Compare and contrast
    - ▶ Critically evaluate
    - ▶ Interpret
    - ▶ Draw a conclusion



# What does it mean to critically evaluate literature reviews?

- ▶ Determine whether or not the methods, data, and/or findings are valid and objective.
- ▶ Is the information clear, concise, organized?
- ▶ Does the article further the academic discussion on the topic? Why or why not?
- ▶ Is the purpose of the study consistent throughout the article and the methods?
- ▶ Is the subject relevant? Why or why not?
- ▶ Are there implications for the study? If not, should there be, and what are they?

# Getting started



- ▶ **Find models:** look for other lit reviews in your field to get more information on how to do your own review
- ▶ **Narrow your topic:** Big topics offer hundreds or even thousands of choices of articles and books. A smaller scope will make your review easier to complete.
- ▶ **Consider the date:** Are your sources current? Many disciplines want the newest information. Sometimes an article that is just a few years old is already obsolete.
- ▶ **Do some research:** You need to know what your discipline expects from a literature review.

# Find your focus



- ▶ A literature review is focused around the **IDEAS** in the material, not the source itself as it would be in an Annotated Bibliography
- ▶ Read widely but selectively
- ▶ Consider the themes and issues that connect your sources together
- ▶ Do you find trends? Debates? Agreement?
- ▶ Pick one theme for your review.

# Consider organization

- ▶ You have a focus. What is the purpose of your literature review?
- ▶ Decide what is the most effective way to present your information.
- ▶ Choose the most important topics and subtopics that you will include.
- ▶ Choose an order in which to present them.
- ▶ Develop an organization for your review.
- ▶ Begin writing.





# Organizing and Drafting Your Lit. Review

# Construct a working summary statement

- ▶ Use your focus to create a summary.
- ▶ You are not arguing a position or an opinion, but for a particular perspective on the material and what binds them.
- ▶ For example:
  - ▶ *The current trend in treatment for congestive heart failure combines surgery and medicine.*
  - ▶ *More and more cultural studies scholars are accepting popular media as a subject worthy of academic consideration.*

# Be sure to cover the 3 basic categories

## ▶ Introduction

- ▶ Quick overview of the subject
- ▶ Includes central theme or organizational pattern

## ▶ Body

- ▶ Discussion of sources: summary, synthesis, evaluation
  - ▶ Organized chronologically, thematically, or methodologically

## ▶ Conclusions/Recommendations

- ▶ Discuss what you have learned from the literature so far
- ▶ Where might your discussion proceed from here? What are the gaps in the research?

# Organizing the Body: Chronological

- ▶ Write about the materials according to when they were published
- ▶ Often this will mean that your individual subjects lack continuity
- ▶ Use chronology only if you want to demonstrate a more important trend.
  - ▶ Publication chronology: If chronological order highlights an idea or a change in practice regarding your subject, it would work.
  - ▶ Chronology by trend: You might put your works in historical chronology, combining recent and older sources if they indicate similar trends



# Organizing the Body: Thematic

- ▶ Organize around a topic or issue rather than progression of time.
- ▶ Determine what you want to emphasize
  - ▶ Even thematically, you might need to use chronology at some point
- ▶ Create subsections to add information that might shift between time periods within each section
  - ▶ Focus on connecting similar themes and breaking them down into smaller components
- ▶ Thematic reviews tend to break chronological order deliberately.
- ▶ Try more than one approach to see what works.

# Organizing the Body: Methodological

- ▶ In this style, the focusing factor is not always the content but the “methods” of the researcher/writer.
- ▶ For example: You might examine the differences between the way your topic is portrayed in different cultures/countries or even in different disciplines.
- ▶ Methodological approach influences the types of documents you choose or the way in which they are discussed.

# Sectioning your review

- ▶ Sections arise out of your organizational strategy.
  - ▶ Chronological: subsections for each time period
  - ▶ Thematic: subtopics based on theme
  - ▶ Methodological: subtopics based on methods
- ▶ You might need additional sections that do not fit your strategy
- ▶ Use only what is necessary
  - ▶ Current situation
  - ▶ History
  - ▶ Methods/Standards
  - ▶ Questions for further research



# The topic of a literature review is always **THE LITERATURE**

Summary statement: The literature in this field says/does \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.

- ▶ Concept 1
  - ▶ Article 1
  - ▶ Article 2
  - ▶ Article 3
- ▶ Concept 2
  - ▶ Article 1
  - ▶ Article 2
  - ▶ Article 3
- ▶ Article 1
  - ▶ Concept 1
  - ▶ Concept 2
  - ▶ Concept 3
- ▶ Article 2
  - ▶ Concept 1
  - ▶ Concept 2
  - ▶ Concept 3



# Strategies for Writing a Literature Review

# Use evidence

- ▶ Your interpretation of sources must be backed up with evidence from the sources to demonstrate the validity of your review.
  - ▶ Writers generally refer to other sources when making their point.
  - ▶ You should do the same.

# Be selective

- ▶ Choose only the most important points in each source to highlight in your review.
- ▶ The type of information you choose should relate to the kind of focus you have chosen: thematic, methodological, chronological.



# Use quotations sparingly

- ▶ Many reviews do not use direct quotes at all because the survey nature of the review does not allow for deep discussion or detailed quoting.
- ▶ A few short quotes for emphasis are permitted.
- ▶ If you really cannot say what you need to without using the author's words, use a quote.
- ▶ You can put unusual terminology in quotation marks.



# Use careful paraphrasing

- ▶ Be sure to present the author's information or opinions accurately in your own words when paraphrasing
- ▶ Make a clear difference between your ideas and the material you are synthesizing from your sources
- ▶ Refer to the rules on what constitutes plagiarism



## And finally...



- ▶ Revise, revise, revise
- ▶ Get rid of slang or “fluff” phrases
- ▶ Re-work the language for clarity and precision
- ▶ Get your terminology right
- ▶ Double-check that you’ve documented sources correctly and formatted your review appropriately for your discipline and your professor
- ▶ Bring your review to the Writing Center for appraisal at any time during the writing process

# Activity

- ▶ Group A: Summarize the article: main ideas of article
- ▶ Group B: Synthesize the article: critically evaluate, interpret, draw conclusions
- ▶ Group C: Discuss gaps in the research

# Sources:

- ▶ Parts of this presentation have been adapted from material published by The Writing Center at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (2010-2012) and the Writing Center at University of Toronto (The Lit. Review: A Few Tips of Conducting It)
- ▶ The Literature Review: A Research Journey by Harvard Library
- ▶ Introduction to Synthesis by MSU
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