Mastering the Literature Review

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Two Worlds of Academic Writing
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Slides at: https://my.nps.edu/web/gwc/resident-workshops
Two Worlds of Academic Writing

Graduate school straddles both

Class paper
- **Length**: Shorter
- **Purpose**: An exercise for learning and applying the methods of your field
- **Audience**: Your professor and potentially classmates
- **Level**: Writing for someone who knows more about the topic (your professor)
- **Formality**: Limited by the assignment
  - **Citation of sources**: Required, but some professors may loosen standards
- **Duration**: A few days to a few weeks
- **Originality of research**: Optional and not likely

Published work... a line has been crossed
- **Length**: Longer
- **Purpose**: To make new knowledge available to academia
- **Audience**: Academics interested in your topic; unlimited, but probably narrow
- **Level**: Writing for an audience who knows less about the topic
- **Formality**: Must meet standards of academic publishing
  - **Theses, dissertations**: Formalities obvious in structure
  - **Journal articles, books**: Formalities embedded in language, vetted in peer-review process
  - **Citation of sources**: By the book; every source must be properly cited
- **Duration**: A few months to ... ???
- **Originality of research**: Required... thus, the literature review
Definition of the Lit Review

• Academic research starts with a research question.
  • *How does polar bear diet predict migration patterns?* [8 words]

• The research question defines its own subfield, which consists of all the published literature that addresses the foundational components underlying the question.
  • Seven books on the eating habits of bears
  • Three articles on the eating habits of polar bears
  • Numerous studies on the polar ecosystem
  • Four articles on polar bear migration
  • The standard reference on polar bear anatomy
  • One article on the biochemistry of polar bear habitats
  • One article on how polar bears catch fish, with statistics on variety

• Because published academic work must contain **new** knowledge, the literature review *evaluates* the subfield for the appropriateness of the research question.
  • LR thesis: While there has been ample study of polar bear diet and habitat, no previous research has used diet *preference* as a way to predict how migration patterns will be affected by the melting of the Arctic ice-cap.

• In short, the literature review, by demonstrating an addition to the subfield, justifies the research.
The glass of water has two parts: **scope** and **content**.

So, too, does research literature. Its **scope** is described in the **literature review**. Its **content** is described in the **background chapter**, and elsewhere in the thesis, where relevant.
Thinking About Scope
Random Examples from Academia

Scope vs. Content

Titles of academic articles often indicate scope


Thinking About Scale

General definition of a literature review: “An evaluation of the published literature in a subfield defined by a research question.”

Difference in scale

**disciplines:**
- Sociology
- Technology
- Information Science

**field:**
effects of technology on society

**topics/questions:**
- Is the 911 call system useful?
- Usefulness of 911 system in responding to medical emergencies
- Usefulness of 911 system in responding to stroke victims
- Usefulness of 911 system in responding to stroke victims in rural communities
The research question and the literature review are tightly bound. The research question establishes its own subfield. The literature review assesses that subfield.

**Scope and scale**
- The research question must be carefully chosen because it will define the scope and scale of the research, *and the scope of the literature review.*

**A shared boundary**
- The research question establishes a boundary, for the research, the writing, *and the literature review.*

**Calibration**
- The research question and the literature review *evolve together.* The question guides the literature-review research, which allows fine-tuning of the question.
The Literature Review: What it is

“An evaluation of the published literature in a subfield defined by a research question.”

- Limited in scope by relevance to research question
- Literature usually in the foreground
  - “A study of studies”
  - Sources often named
  - Heavily cited; footnotes or in-text cites
- Summary and synthesis to fit topic into the broader context of the field
  - Main components
  - Fundamental definitions
  - Schools of thought
  - Etc.
- Focused, not exhaustive
- Up-to-date

**Summary:** *High-level evaluation of what we know to date*
A literature review is *not*:

- Background
- Summary
  - If you’re *paraphrasing*, you’re probably not *evaluating*
- List of sources; or
- Annotated bibliography
- Evaluation of reviewed, but irrelevant, sources
- A forum for new research
Three main types:

- **Standalone**
  - Big picture of topic
  - Not connected to a research question
  - Aggregates disparate ideas
  - *Thesis potential?*

- **Thesis/dissertation proposal**
  - Preliminary
  - Exploratory
  - Incomplete

- **Thesis/dissertation**
  - Refined
  - Focused
  - Thorough
Master’s Thesis vs. PhD Dissertation

**General Definitions**

**Master’s thesis**: At NPS, application of the knowledge gained through your degree program to a real-world problem. More likely to test existing theories.

**PhD dissertation**: Contribution of new knowledge to the field. More likely to address foundational knowledge: questions in the theoretical domain or fundamental methodologies.

**Length of literature review**

- No specific length requirement; depends on the context. But . . .
  - Master’s thesis: Shorter; approximately 3-5 pages.
  - PhD dissertation: Longer; approximately 20-50 pages.
- Keep in mind:
  - Literature reviews are pithy.
  - Too much literature may indicate too broad a topic.
Role of the Advisor

The ultimate requirement for the content of the literature review is your advisor’s expectation. Advisors can also provide:

- Names of key works and authors
- Examples of well-crafted literature reviews
  - Calhoun is a database of NPS theses, including recent ones under your advisor’s guidance
    - calhoun.nps.edu
- Feedback on your draft literature review

Writing Center coaches can review your literature review at any stage.
The value of identifying weakness

- Research requires scrutiny; the more, the better. The best research stands up.
- Agreement is not usually the path to originality.
  - Academia benefits from many voices, with the fittest surviving

Areas of potential weakness

- Admitted weaknesses
- Lack of theoretical framework
- Lack of consensus among experts
- Incongruity between theory and facts
- Overly optimistic assumptions
- Lack of counterarguments
- Gaps
- New field
- Knowledge that is simply wrong . . . Or:
  - Out of date
  - Contradictory
  - Insufficient; inconclusive
  - Statistically insufficient
  - Logically weak; unconvincing

Biases

- Methodological
- Instrumentation
- Paradigm
- Discipline
- Institutional/Reciprocity
- Financial
- Survival
- Cultural/Social Validation
- Belief-in-self/Moral License
- Passthrough (partial info)
- Reductionism/Silver Bullet
- Stockholm Syndrome

red = questionable scholarship
Critical Nature of the Literature Review

Potential Strengths of the Existing Literature

Areas of potential strength

- Valid theoretical framework
- Agreement among experts
- Congruity between theory and facts
- Knowledge that is current . . . Or:
  - Consistent
  - Sufficient
  - Logically coherent
  - Statistically valid
  - Unbiased
  - etc.

Substance of the Literature Review

- Evaluate the existing literature.
- Argue in support of your evaluation.
Organization and Writing of a Literature Review

Preparation for the Literature Review

- Document your reading as you go.
  - Enter complete bibliographic information.

- Note-taking
  - Don’t rely on your memory. As a writing project lasts longer, memory becomes an increasingly important variable.
  - Make note of important quotes and other valuable material.
  - Tag quotes (“useful quote I found”) to prevent confusing material with your own.

- Keywords and key phrases
  - Note important terms to make notes text-searchable.
  - Be consistent in terminology/spelling, even if sources vary.

- Organize notes by theme
  - Basic definitions
  - Main ideas
  - Methodologies
  - Areas of research
Organization and Writing of a Literature Review

A Literature Review has Structure

- Introduction
  - Scope of the review
  - Describe the structure of the review
  - A thesis statement for the review itself
    - “The effectiveness of the 911 system has been studied on numerous occasions, as has the need for early treatment of stroke victims, but there has been no recent effort to connect these two problem domains.”

- Organization by themes, not sources
  - Section headings; import if lit review runs long
  - Keep evaluations brief, high-level, and accurate
  - If appropriate, quantify the literature in a table

- Optionally, a conclusion
  - If a grand synthesis is needed
  - How the research question will fit into existing knowledge
    - “This study will show that early intervention, facilitated by the 911 system, can play a significant role in minimizing the long-term damages from stroke.”
Literature Review: Example

Model Literature Review E – “The Prevalence of Stalking Among College Students”

Length
Is this a long document?

Read
Don’t get sidetracked on the content.

Identify
1. Scope
2. Organization
3. Other key lit review elements

Elements
- high-level writing/synthesis
- research question/thesis
- gap in literature
- evaluation/criticism
- definitions
- broader context
- boundary definitions
- timeliness
- justification of study
- organization by theme (next slide)
Model Literature Review E – “The Prevalence of Stalking Among College Students”

Identify organization

Paragraph(P)-Line(L)

P1-L1: vignette
P2-L18: reported prevalence rates
P3-L33: negative effects of stalking
P4-L57, P5-L79: measurement of prevalence rates
P6-L88: definitions
P7-L97: assessing whether culture of violence exists
P8-L114: application of social norms theory
P9-L136: *purpose of study*
Literature Review: Example

Model Literature Review E – “The Prevalence of Stalking Among College Students”

Identify elements

- high-level writing/synthesis: L20-22, based on 6 sources; L33-36, 7 sources
- research question/thesis: L136-139
- gap in literature: L74-78
- evaluation/critical elements: P4-6 and L104-107
- fundamental definitions: P6
- broader context: P8
- elements that define boundaries: P1 and L63-65
- timeliness: 2012 article; Reference dates, 1997-2010
- justification of study: entire lit review
Bibliography/Resources

Books

[Most current work is slanted toward the social sciences.]
[Includes nine examples, two to nine pages in length. Book focuses on standalone lit reviews.]
[First full book on literature reviews.]

Article/video

[Nice article by former NPS NSA professor.]
Knopf presentation based on his article [1:17:31]:
http://www.nps.edu/video/portal/Video.aspx?enc=VQRI1%2ft0jcMx3RtMJ3k4hSFXkXRQBFxP

Graduate Writing Center

- Links to resources:
  https://my.nps.edu/web/gwc/resources
  [Writing Resources by Topic: Literature Reviews]
- Meet with a writing coach:
  https://my.nps.edu/web/gwc/wconline-redirect

Dudley Knox Library

- SAGE Research Methods Online: Literature Reviews
  http://methods.sagepub.com/project-planner/reviewing-the-literature
The End

Questions?

Slides at:
https://my.nps.edu/web/gwc/resident-workshops

Comments and suggestions welcome. Email John at:
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