Conceptualizing Literature Reviews

Undergraduate Research Workshop 2020

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Research Means Joining a Conversation

- Scholars talk to each other - *they communicate in writing, in conference presentations*

- They share ideas about how to solve common problems

- They synthesize, criticize, and correct what's been said before

Research Means Joining a Conversation

- Scholars talk to each other - *they communicate in writing, in conference presentations*

    Who are you talking to?

- They share ideas about how to solve common problems

    What topics and problems are you working on?

- They synthesize, criticize, and correct what's been said before

    What has been said before?

A Literature Review Surveys Published Research

- Lays out a number of authors you're responding to; it situates your work

- Says what is known about your problem--its components, its history, etc.

- Synthesizes what has been said before that can be built on - by criticizing, correcting, etc.

Lit Reviews Find Gaps

- It is productive to notice where there are gaps in knowledge, or where problems linger

- These offer opportunities for scholars to fill the gaps with new research, to offer new solutions to problems

What does a Lit Review Look Like?

- Sometimes, it's a standalone assignment or article
  - Shows that you understand a field, a topic, a problem
  - Serves other scholars who are working on similar issues by locating gaps/problems

- Sometimes, it's a part of a larger argument
  - In a research paper or thesis, the literature review can often be found after the introduction
  - It gives context and background for the claims you want to make

- Every published article has some amount of literature review, though sometimes it is quite short and focused (it gives context for the argument)

Examples

Standalone Lit Reviews

1. Sample 1
2. Sample 2
3. Sample 3 (Ashford University Writing Center Sample)

Lit Reviews as Preludes to an Argument

1. Sample 4
2. Sample 5

How Do I Write a Lit Review?

In general, you should:

- Summarize and Synthesize your sources
    - Keep *Relevance* as a top priority: how does source A respond to my topic/problem? How does source B build on that, and offer different conclusions? How does source C offer new methodological tools, and what new results follow?

- You may also criticize and evaluate
    - Does source A sufficiently address my topic/problem? Is source B effective in building on that? How useful are source C's new methodological tools?

How Do I Write a Lit Review?

A Few Basic Parts

- Offer an introduction that names your topic and gives a general sense of your findings, the conclusions of your synthesis
- Write a body that shows how scholars have responded to that topic
  - Organize by chronology (perhaps the weakest), thematic/conceptual concerns, or methodology
  - Show trends, divisions among scholars, and major developments
- Include a conclusion
  - What can you take away from the conversation? What should its next steps be? *All about locating Gaps, preparing for Arguments*
- Include a bibliography or works cited list of your sources

How Do I Write a Lit Review?

- Find models in your field of study and imitate their styles

- Ask your professor:
    - How many sources should I include?
    - Should I just summarize and synthesize, or should I criticize and evaluate?
    - What structure would you prefer?

Use the Best Sources Online for Advice

- UNC Writing Center - https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/literature-reviews/

- Purdue OWL - https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/conducting_research/writing_a_literature_review.html

- University Wisconsin Writing Center (good samples) - https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/assignments/reviewofliterature/

Questions?

Thank you, and good luck!

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A Research Argument has Four Parts

1. Context
   a. (status quo state of knowledge)
2. Problem/question
   a. (disruption of status quo)
3. Significance/stakes
   a. (If we were to solve your problem, or answer your question, what would we gain? If we couldn't do so, what would we lose?
4. Answer/Solution (*your thesis!*)

→ These usually occur in the introduction of an article or a book, and their length is proportional to the length of the whole