

ENG 500 RESEARCH METHODS: RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION
Fall 2008
REVIEW OF LITERATURE ASSIGNMENT

Rough Draft Due : October 27, 2008

Final Draft Due: November 3, 2008

A review of the literature (prior scholarship in the area(s) covered by your research problem, question, or hypothesis) helps you to identify *what* has been done and *how* it has been done as well as *what remains* to be done in your research area. As such, it serves several important functions. It can help you:

- limit and define your research problem more clearly
- transform a tentative problem into a detailed and concise plan of action
- gain insights into methods, materials, participants, and approaches
- locate suggestions for future research
- locate other research relevant to your research problem
- identify factors that have not been previously considered (a “gap”)

In addition to research studies (i.e., empirical research, or other kind of scholarship, relevant to your topic) also review opinion pieces (e.g., an article debating the validity of a particular study or approach) and methods pieces (e.g., sources that explain and justify particular methods related to the kind of methods you plan to use). If your research area warrants it, you might also review historical pieces, theoretical pieces, and textual analysis pieces. As a way to limit your review, use a ten-year span from the present unless your project is meant to provide a historical overview of your topic. In general, you are looking for current available research.

Your search of the literature will probably uncover one or more of the following: some consistent patterns found by other researchers, discrepancies among researchers as to the meaning, value and significance of the patterns, discrepancies among the patterns themselves, competing or contradictory claims, conclusions or findings, or a lack of research either in terms of focus or methods (i.e., the “gap” in which to situate your own work). You will need to deal with any discrepancies in your written review of the literature, making clear where you are situated in relation to the debate. Here is where good notes are crucial. See the handout Heuristic for Taking Notes for a Research Project for suggestions.

Writing the Review of Literature

Your written review of the literature helps to situate your research problem within a general body of prior scholarship. In many instances, it also serves to instruct readers who may not be too familiar with your particular line of research. Taken together, a review of the literature serves both an argumentative (or persuasive) and a didactic function.

Before planning and writing this essay, it may be helpful to examine the journal *Review of Education Research*, for models of reviews of literature. For other examples, see:

DiPardo, Anne, and Sarah Warshauer Freedman. "Peer Response Groups in the Writing Classroom: Theoretical Foundations and New Directions." *Review of Educational Research* 58 (1988): 119--49.

Harsanyi, Martha A. "Multiple Authors, Multiple Problems—Bibliometrics and the Study of Scholarly Collaboration: A Literature Review." *Library and Information Science Research* 15 (1993): 325-354.

Hudson, Thom. "Theoretical Perspectives on Reading." *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 18 (1998): 43-60.

Spivey, Nancy Nelson. "Construing Constructivism: Reading Research in the United States." *Poetics* 16 (1987): 169-92.

Although the above review essays are generally more comprehensive than what you will write, they nevertheless offer excellent examples of how research literature is synthesized and presented; in other words, these examples demonstrate the delicate balance between the twin purposes of persuading and teaching.

Also review the introductions to the studies we are reading in this class and those of scholarly pieces you are reading in your research area to see how other researchers have reviewed the relevant literature (prior scholarship) to provide a frame for their studies.

You will probably want to organize your discussion around several sub-topics, for which you usually will discuss in detail at least two or three studies that are most relevant and methodologically sound. If other studies produced similar results, you can simply summarize these in one sentence (e.g., "X's findings have been supported by other studies that employed essentially the same approach" (then name the sources). Avoid simply stringing together a series of isolated summaries of the research studies. In the process of synthesizing the findings, you need to interpret their meaning or significance (either you can repeat what the research says about these or you can disagree with the researcher and explain why). Also avoid relying too heavily on quotations (unlike other kinds of scholarship, what the author found or argues is more important than what s/he said and how s/he said it). To identify the "sub-topics," examine your research question(s) closely, noting the kinds of scholarly areas or research topics embedded in it.

Once you have identified one or more topics to research in the literature, you might try to locate reviews of literature other scholars have done on the topic(s). These provide a useful starting point for developing a working bibliography.

Relation of Research Question to Review of Literature : Some researchers begin their review with their research questions as a way of focusing on a particular area. Others use the review of literature as way to prepare the reader for, and along the way to argue for, their research questions. Still others never actually state their question(s), but imply them through their treatment of the research. Whatever you choose, your reader needs to understand the research question(s) that are guiding your study.

Requirements: Review at least 15-20 sources and limit your essay to between 7-10 pages.

Guidelines

Process

1. Establish a schedule (work back from the due date and sketch out tasks to be accomplished—searching, reading and note taking, drafting, revising—set approximate deadlines for these tasks) Include time to review sample reviews of literature to become familiar with the genre conventions.
2. Take good notes (see Heuristics for Taking Notes for Research Projects)
3. Identify sub-topics for your review
4. Review and organize notes by sub-topics
5. Create a rough topic outline for your review (reorganize notes if necessary); revise topic outline as need while you write
6. Within each topic area note similarities, differences and gaps

Rough Draft

1. Begin by identifying the broad problem area (though avoid global statements)
2. Early in the review, establish the importance of your topic and the scope of the literature reviewed
3. Draft a topic-by-topic description of the relevant research, and provide major and minor sub-headings to guide the reader
4. Toward the end, summarize the review, noting especially any gap(s) in the research
5. Write a title for the review that signals the topic area and approach

Revision

1. You will have an opportunity for peer feedback in class, but it's a good idea to solicit additional feedback from peers outside of class as well. (This is a good scholarly habit to develop.) Allow time for feedback and redrafting.
2. Review your draft for:
 - a. Importance or significance of topic (Is your topic significant from a theoretical and/or practical perspective?)
 - b. Organization of Introduction (does it include introduction of problem, a discussion of the relevant literature, and a conclusion)
 - c. Effectiveness of the Introduction (Does your introduction describe the scope of the literature? Does it signal the organization of the review? Does it identify the line of argument for the review?)
 - d. Currency, Relevance, thoroughness, and accuracy of literature reviewed (Have you examined the current trends, relevant literature in a thorough and accurate manner?)
 - e. Effectiveness of Conclusion (Does your conclusion provide closure for the reader? Does it make reference to the line of argument you specified in the introduction?)
 - f. Works Cited or References (Have you checked to make sure that every reference used is cited in the Works Cited or Reference section? Are all of the entries complete? Do they comply with the style guide you used (e.g., MLA, APA, Chicago, etc.)?)