The Literature Review

Writing a literature review can be an intimidating process, but here’s the good news: the process involves many skills that students practice all the time, such as reading literature to find out what conversations are happening between scholars, gathering and synthesizing information, comparing and contrasting ideas, and presenting information so that readers can easily understand the author’s thinking. If the research literature is where scholars have conversations with each other about their topics, the literature review is your opportunity to help your reader understand those conversations and how your topic fits within them.

The goal of this video is to demystify the process of writing a literature review and provide suggestions for how to get organized to write.

Here’s where we’re going to start: Imagine you’ve been invited to a cocktail party with many scholars in your field. Naturally, you invite your favourite person to attend the party with you, but unfortunately, on the day of the party, your favourite person comes down with the flu and can’t attend. Your favourite person insists that you go to the party, but requests that when you come home, you describe all the conversations you had, including identifying who you spoke with, what you talked about, any themes of conversation that emerged through the evening, and if conversation partners agreed or disagreed with each other.

You might think relaying conversations to someone else shouldn’t be that hard; after all, you only have to explain what was said. However, you quickly realize that it’s going to take more than a basic replay of the action to help your favourite person understand the events of the evening. You may have had the experience of someone telling you about a conversation using an approach of “she said this…and then he said that…and then she said something else …and then he said this”, and if so, you’ll know that it’s nearly impossible to keep track of the conversation. To make sure your favourite person understands all the conversations that took place, you will need to have a plan for how you’re going to approach your explanation.

So off you go to the cocktail party, and when you get there, the room is full of scholars, and by an amazing coincidence, their conversations are all focused on some aspect of your research topic!

As you stand in the middle of the room, you start to realize there are circles of conversation happening around you.

The inner circle involves conversations between people whose research is most directly related and relevant to your topic. When you think about how you want to divide your time during the party, it’s these scholars who most interest you.

The middle circle contains the people whose research informed the scholars in the inner circle. Their conversations are important and relevant to your topic, but they may not receive as much of your time and attention as those in the inner circle.

Finally, in the outer circle, you find the founders of the field. Without the conversations these scholars started, there wouldn’t be a field, so you definitely want to acknowledge them and their works. However, when you’re deciding how you’re going to spend your time at the party, the conversations in the outer circle will likely receive less attention than those in the inner circles.

The conversations continue to swirl, and you realize that it simply isn’t going to be possible to talk to everyone at the party. In fact, you’re going to have to decide how you’re going to limit your conversations, which involves deciding who you want to ensure you talk with during the evening. Consequently, there will be some people with whom you won’t be able to have in-depth conversations, and they will likely be the scholars whose research focus is only distantly related to yours. You could wave at them on the way to the cheese table, but you don’t want to take up time talking with them instead of focusing on the scholars in those inner circles of conversation.

Coming back to how you’re going to make sense of all these conversations for your favourite person, a little more organization will help to theme the conversations. Conveniently, at parties, people who are having similar conversations often gather together.

At this party, the scholars who share similar interests have helpfully created three groups, though depending on the size of the gathering and the number of topics discussed by the partygoers, the number could be larger or fewer, just as the number of themes in a literature review can vary depending on the scope of the document or research. At this party, the first group is discussing theories, the second group is discussing history, and the third group is discussing philosophies, but again, the topics could be different, depending on the interests of the scholars.

Dividing the conversation into themes will help with relaying the experience to your favourite person, because now, in addition to the three circles of connectedness, you can also explain those connections within the themes. Instead of the description being “there were this many people whose conversations were connected to my research to varying degrees”, you can be more specific: “With respect to the history of the topic I’m researching, there were three people who were directly connected, four people whose research enabled those researchers to expand the field, and two people who founded the entire field of study”. From there, you can further elaborate on how their research connects; for example, did they agree or disagree? Did they discover new topics? Are there obvious gaps in the conversation?

The last thing to consider is how you can be consistent in relaying the information. For example, if you are explaining the conversations in the history theme, you could start broadly at the founding of the field and move to the specifics of current research.

If you start broadly and move to the specifics in the first description, it’s helpful to take the same approach in subsequent descriptions. The first approach will set your favourite person’s (or reader’s) expectations, and it can be confusing to audiences if approaches change mid-discussion. Therefore, if you take a broad to specific approach in history, consider doing the same when you discuss theories.

Going broad to narrow when discussing theories could mean starting with the theories developed by the people in the outer circle and explaining how the increasing degrees of connectedness within the circles bring you to the more specific theories you’ll be using in your research. That description could also include discussions of how agreements or disagreements in the conversations helped to bring you to your specific focus.

Once you have your plan for how you’re going to describe all these conversations to your audience, whether that’s your favourite person or readers of your literature review, you can confidently present the information with all the necessary details.

Here are some final tips:

A successful literature review requires planning because of the complexity of the task. Creating a plan that outlines your approach to the level of the specific details in your paragraphs will make the writing process easier and more manageable.

The literature review focuses on the ideas scholars have shared in the literature, not who published them. Using a “she said/he said” approach is difficult when you’re trying to show the connections, agreements, and disagreements between ideas. Instead, present arguments within paragraphs that start with a strong claim and use the ideas from the literature to support the claims. Citing those ideas will give the credit to the authors, and citations that point readers to more than one resource demonstrate your breadth of familiarity with the research.

Finally, focus on paraphrasing ideas rather than using direct quotations. Paraphrasing demonstrates your understanding of the ideas and also allows you to articulate ideas that are shared by many scholars.

For more information about literature reviews, please visit “[Literature Reviews](https://library.royalroads.ca/writing-centre/academic-writing/literature-reviews)”, and if you’re a Royal Roads student, please feel welcome to [contact the Writing Centre](https://writeanswers.royalroads.ca) for additional assistance.