

# Writing Effective Literature Reviews

Integrative Research Project - July 2008

Thursday, July 24, 2008

## **Purpose!**

- Literature reviews have a purpose! They are not a list of related work.
- Purpose:
  - Convey what knowledge and ideas have been established in your field.
  - Show what questions remain unanswered, not adequately answered, should be answered differently, have answers that are contentious.
  - *Literature reviews set up your work as an important contribution to the understanding of your field.*

## **Goals of a literature review**

- Show what weaknesses exist in current literature.
- Show what ideas are controversial.
- Discuss what assumptions current ideas/theories rest on.
- Synthesize these ideas into what is known and what is unknown.
- Expose questions/issues that need more research
- All this should be guided by *your thesis question*.
- There should be a good reason (related to your work) for citing every work you cite.

## **Ask these questions**

- What is the author's question?
- What is the scope or significance of the work?
  - Is it clearly defined?
  - Is it adequate?

- Should it be expanded?
- Is it too general? That is, is the author’s claim of importance applicable to more specialized cases?
- What methodology is the author using?
  - Is is quantitative, qualitative?
  - If quantitative, what statistical methods are applied?
  - What data or evidence is used?
  - Are these methods appropriate?
  - Is there room for improvement?
  - Are the results robust to the choice of methodology?

### **More questions to ask**

- Does the article evaluate all the relevant literature?
  - Does the author include literature that doesn’t agree with the results of this work?
- What are the limitations or weaknesses of the article (every, every, every piece of research has weaknesses!!!)
- In what ways does the article contribute to the understanding of your problem/question?

### **Tips**

- Don’t list literature.
- Discuss an idea, an evolution of an understanding of an idea.
- Bring up literature as it relates to the idea.
- You need a reason for mentioning every reference. Keep in mind why you are bringing up each specific paper.
- Spend more time discussing the articles that are more closely related to your work. Spend less time with the articles less related to your work.
- Look around for not-yet published work, works in progress, working paper versions of currently published papers.
- Literature reviews are not the only places where citations should appear.
- Don’t think you are done with your literature review until you think you are done with your thesis.

### **Where to look**

- scholar.google.com ← especially useful for not-yet-published papers.
- EBSCOHost databases: available on the library's website.
- Social Science Research Network: [www.ssrn.org](http://www.ssrn.org)
- Economics and financial research: [ideas.repec.org](http://ideas.repec.org)
- Government documents: [www.gpoaccess.com](http://www.gpoaccess.com)
- Bibliographies and literature reviews of papers you have already found.
- Give yourself plenty of time. ILL may take a long time.

### **Make records**

1. Author
2. Title
3. If journal article: Journal, volume, issue, year, pages.
4. If book: Publisher, place, date, edition, relevant pages.
5. If working paper: source, date (day, month, year)
6. How and where you found it: what search engine, what website, library, etc.
7. Thesis statement: one sentence purpose of the paper.
8. Description of how this work contributes to your thesis.
9. Why would you cite this work? How does it fit in your literature review story?

### **Homework: Annotated Bibliography**

- Follow the notes on the previous slide.
- Due next Thursday, July 31: at least 4 sources.
- Due Thursday, August 14 (Last day of class): at least 10 sources (including four from July 31).