TIPS FOR WRITING LITERATURE REVIEWS

ABOUT LITERATURE REVIEWS

A literature review is a document or portion of an essay that gives an overview of the scholarly conversation about a particular topic or research question. Students often confuse the literature review with the kind of summary that forms the basis of a book report, which gives a paragraph-by-paragraph or section-by-section description of what a writer says. Instead, a strong literature review summarizes, and sometimes analyzes, the arguments made by scholars. Literature reviews often focus on scholarly theories and can be a useful tool when entering a larger project like a Capstone essay. The end goal is an overview that situates the student-scholar’s own argument as a meaningful contribution to a discussion on a specific topic.

YOUR RESEARCH QUESTION

The basis for a strong literature review is a research question that is:

- **Audience-aware.** Your question deals with a subject your audience finds compelling.

- **Ambitious.** Your question is open-ended and deep enough that it can sustain an extended overview; basically, you want to be asking questions that other people are already talking about. If you find there is little to no research on a question you want to ask, broaden it a bit and see if you are not focusing too much on the gaps in the scholarly conversation already.

- **Arguable.** As you formulate your research question, you want to consider whether scholars are already making effective arguments about a topic and frame a question in a way that you can imagine might provoke good scholarly debate.

- **Answerable.** Make sure you frame your question in a way that you can actually find research that addresses it. Instead of, “Does poverty lead to war?” try something like, “Did the economic conditions in the South in the 1860s lead to the Civil War?” While it’s arguable that poverty could lead to war, it’s too broad, too rhetorical or too esoteric to make for an effective research question.

- **Appropriate in scope.** You want a question that is limited enough that you can give a good sense of the scholarly conversation within the length of the paper or essay section. You need to do enough research that you don’t feel like you have to include every article you read in your literature review. Instead, some of the articles will be outside the scope of your review because they are not dealing directly with the clear
research question you have set forth. Before you include an article in your literature review, ask yourself: how does this article relate to my specific research question?

ORGANIZING YOUR LITERATURE REVIEW

There are a number of ways to organize your literature review. It might help to organize scholarly work by the way it relates to particular aspects of your research question or by various schools of thought rather than in the chronological order of a conversation.

Here are some questions to consider as you decide how to write up your review:

- **What are the classifications that have already occurred in this discussion?**
- **What are the points of contention?**
- **Where do people agree and where do they disagree?**
- **What fields and sub-fields have emerged within this discussion?**
- **What are the gaps in the conversation?**

The gaps in a discussion are a key question to consider as your literature review sets up your own argument. By identifying these gaps, you can often make a compelling argument that is appropriately limited in scope; without trying to say “all scholars everywhere are wrong about this,” you can point out that scholars A, B, and C all miss this crucial point and then make an argument that fits well into the larger theoretical discussion.

ANALYZING ARGUMENTS

Though there are a number of methods for identifying and analyzing arguments, one of the most useful for literature reviews is the Toulmin Method. Stephen Toulmin was a British philosopher whose 1958 *The Uses of Argument* laid out the methods by which people made effective and convincing arguments. The Toulmin Method relies on the following terms:

**Claims:** A claim is an arguable statement that a scholar then has to prove. These statements can be controversial or debatable; they are the points of contention within a good scholarly conversation. Being able to identify a scholar’s main claim, as well as the many sub-claims within his argument, will allow you to more effectively outline his argument.

**Evidence:** Evidence is the proof the scholar uses to back up a claim. Evidence use varies by discipline and can include original research the scholar has performed as well as quotations or summaries of other scholarly works that back up the arguable statement the scholar is setting forth.
These two elements of an argument are explicitly stated:

![Claim](image1) ![Evidence](image2)

However, there is another element of an effective argument that is implied.

**Warrant:** A warrant is a general principle that makes particular evidence work when backing up a particular claim (Booth, Colomb and Williams 112).

![Claim](image1) ![Evidence](image2) ![Warrant](image3)

When you analyze a warrant, you need to state it as a generalization upon which an argument depends. Consider the following example from *The Craft of Research*:

**Claim:** It must have rained last night.  
*Why do you think that? (That is, what's your evidence?)*

**Evidence:** The streets are wet this morning.  
*What makes you think that wet streets should count as evidence of rain? (That is, what's your warrant?)*

**Warrant:** Whenever we see wet streets in the morning, we can usually conclude that it rained the night before (Booth, Colomb and Williams 111).

**MOVING TOWARD YOUR OWN CONTRIBUTION**

In general, literature reviews are included as a separate assignment or part of a larger assignment in which you make your own contribution to the scholarly conversation you describe. Each model is different; rely on your professor’s prompt or guidance to let you know whether you should include a section setting up your own argument. However, it is important for your own sake to identify the ways in which you will enter the conversation.

**Warrants are not necessarily something you will include in a literature review. However, they can lead you to understand larger theoretical claims in a scholarly conversation.** Claims and evidence are much easier to state since they are written explicitly in a text; identifying warrants can help you notice logical gaps in any scholarly conversation or see the shared assumptions upon which scholars rely. You can also point out ways your argument enters a discussion. And if you are able to challenge a scholar’s warrant, you can make a more effective argument against her main claim.
Think ahead to how your lit review sets up your own contribution. Two of the most effective ways to make your argument is to challenge **warrants based on empirical experience** and **warrants based on authority** (Booth, Colomb and Williams 128-29). Systematic research and a scholar’s own experience in a field lead to claims that rely on these types of warrants. The way to challenge this type of warrant is by countering a scholar’s argument with contradictory or more compelling evidence. You are also looking at ways to demonstrate that a scholar’s claims are not totally reliable, which you will do through collecting stronger data or using the evidence from theories or concepts of different authorities within a field to back up your claims.

There are no cut-and-dried formulas for writing a literature review. By focusing on giving an overview of the scholarly arguments, understanding the shared cultural and critical assumptions, identifying the claims and evidence each author puts forth, and looking for gaps in the discussion, you can use literature reviews as an effective tool for your reader and yourself. The argument you draw out of your literature review will be more informed, more nuanced, and ultimately more effective, which is the goal of this scholarly exercise.

**SOURCES:**
