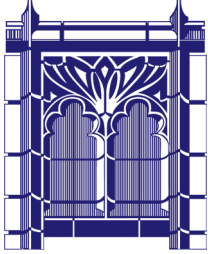


The Literature Review



THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
mentor memo
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By Professor Nancy Rivenburgh

This Mentor Memo, part of a series, responds to graduate students' requests for advice about navigating graduate studies successfully.

The series also addresses topics in career preparation and professional development. For more information and to suggest topics, contact Graduate School Dean Jerry Baldasty at baldasty@u.washington.edu.

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From seminar paper to MA thesis to dissertation, the literature review provides both the foundation and the frame for your own research. Its preparation requires careful planning and a well-crafted presentation.

The purpose of the literature review

A literature review tells us what is known by sharing the results of prior studies related to your own.

A literature review places your study within a larger body of work. It shows how your study seeks to fill a gap in, or extend, our knowledge in this area.

A literature review offers a benchmark for assessing your own results. In the conclusion to your study you will revisit the literature review armed with your new findings.

Organizing the literature review

A good literature review is a synthesis of prior research presented in a way that adds value to our understanding of that work. So, it's important to organize your review in a way that is coherent, relevant to your own study, and useful to other researchers. For example, you might cluster prior research by media type, communication situation, similar findings, key themes, respondent type, or other useful distinction.

Whatever organizing scheme you choose, it is typical to present the most important, relevant, or strongest collection of existing research first, and go from there. If not, there should be a narrative logic to the review presentation.

Another way to add value is to identify conceptual linkages among ideas and authors. Researchers often talk about the same processes—just in somewhat different ways.

It's tempting to want to include every study that appeared in the key word search of your topic. Don't. The challenge is to find the right balance between giving the reader confidence in your familiarity with literature and focusing on what's most relevant for the study at hand.

there's more... >

Writing the literature review

Your synthesis of prior research should focus on key findings or conclusions with just enough information for the reader to discern the question and approach: “In her ethnographic study of Muslim immigrants’ perception of mainstream British media, Gillespie concluded...” The exception being if the study cited is significant because of its methodology—only then would you offer more methodological detail.

Not all ideas in the literature review are used to construct your study’s conceptual framework. So, at the end of each section, tell readers what key concept, finding, definition, or theme is most critical to “carry forward” into their reading of your study.

Don’t over-quote. It slows down your narrative. Direct quotations should only appear if the author said something in a unique, powerful, or precise way (e.g., a definition) that demands repeating in its exact form. Otherwise, use your own words.

Since a good review is a coherent, value-added organization of the literature, provide the reader with clear “signposts” through the instructive use of headings, introductions, transition phrases, and summary statements.

Finally, because people reading your paper or dissertation may not be familiar with your area of research, be careful not to weigh down your literature review in field-specific jargon. It is important that you write in clear and active prose.