Writing a Literature Review

What is a literature review?

No real surprises here: a literature review is a review of the literature relevant to your paper. Before you can begin the analysis/discussion of your data, you need to make sure that you are not simply repeating work that has already been done. You need to demonstrate for your reader that you are aware of how your research fits into (and fills any gaps in) the currently existing body of literature. After your introduction, the literature review is the first part of your research paper.

How do I start a literature review?

Before we dive into the nuts and bolts, I should tell you that you can do an Internet search for “Literature Review” and you’ll find most of what you’ll see here (and more). I have condensed the available information into what should be most helpful to you for THIS SPECIFIC PROJECT. Should you need to write a literature review in the future, you might wish to expand your understanding.

Your first step in writing your literature review is defining your specific research area. If you’ve already created a thesis (a statement about what you think is happening) or a research question (a question about what you think might be happening), then your research area has already been defined. If you have not created a thesis or hypothesis, what are you waiting for? You’ll need to know what you’re looking for BEFORE you can begin your literature review.

Once you have a working thesis or hypothesis, you can begin putting the boundaries on your field of study. Let’s use my dissertation as an example here. My thesis was that the existence of polysemy and images of mixed race in certain television genres (science fiction, soap opera, and situation comedy) assists the process of hegemony by allowing socially conscious readers/viewers to believe they are participating in a resistant text, lulled by the existence of a dialogue on mixed race. So, if I were to list the areas of study covered in my thesis, the list would resemble the following: television, race and mixed race, polysemy, science fiction, soap opera, situation comedy, hegemony, and counter hegemony. These areas, then, must be addressed in my literature review.

NOTE: You’ll notice that my thesis mentions nothing of my method; your review of the methodology literature happens in the “Method” section of your paper.

What’s next?

Now that you have a few search terms, you can begin looking for the books, articles, and papers that are most relevant to what you are writing. You should be looking for two types of works: one, the landmark studies in the field, and two, the most recent research on your topics. As far as landmark studies are concerned, you need to show your reader that you know who the giants are, and that you’ve considered their contributions before creating your own. The “Cited In” function on Google
Scholar should help you distinguish between a heavy hitter and a bench warmer. As far as recent research is concerned, you only need to worry about published works, but the MOST recent work will likely be in the form of a conference paper. Thus, if you find a conference paper from six or seven years ago, you’re not looking at the best possible source (bonus points for anyone who can tell me why this is so).

As you continue your search, you’re likely to encounter sources that are perfect, agreeing with every idea you can dream up. You’re just as likely to encounter sources that seem to prove the exact opposite of what you’re after. Should you trash a source because the author disagrees with the point you are trying to make? Certainly not! Your literature review does not have to consist solely of pieces that offer favorable theses to your research. You can include those authors who argue against your thesis. If you can, in your analysis, create a compelling argument against those who would oppose you, you can make your analysis that much stronger. It shows that your analysis is hiding nothing. You are, in effect, saying, “I know Johnson and Wong say that X is the case, but here’s why I think text Y is an example of Z.”

Can I start writing the darn thing yet?

Almost. Before you write, you’ll need to create some kind of order, a way to organize the works you locate. In my dissertation example listed above, my topic areas are wide and diverse. I have to organize my discussion of these areas in a way that makes sense to my reader and accomplishes the goals of my argument. In my actual literature review, I started with studies about race and media. You might be asking yourself, “Isn’t that too narrow? Shouldn’t I start broadly and work my way down to the specific?” Well, the answer is yes…and no. Beginning with studies on race and media IS starting broadly. You don’t want to begin a critique of television with, “Thousands of years ago, when dinosaurs roamed the earth…” You need to begin with the outfield, but you should still be inside the ballpark.

I covered the landmark studies in race and film, then race and television. I used this section to illustrate the first gap filled by my research. There were several studies of mixed race and film, but very few studies of mixed race and television. So, I started my literature review with a discussion of the works that dealt with my content; the next section of my literature review dealt with the theories I planned to use, hegemony and polysemy.

For hegemony, I had to begin by discussing Gramsci, as he is the scholar credited with the creation of the theory. Then, I discussed the recent scholars who had used hegemony in their research on media, specifically television, and even more specifically race and/or culture and television. For polysemy, I did the same thing. I finished this section of my literature review by discussing what some scholars see as the challenges or benefits of each theory. Here, you see the secondary function of the literature review. It should not be a simple list of works. You need to make sure you understand (and are able to justify) WHY you are including each item in your
literature review. You should be able to summarize the works you’ve chosen, for sure, but you should also be able to critique and comment on those works.

For my dissertation, I continued with a detailed review of the three genres I had selected, but it was a dissertation, not a McNair journal article, so your page limits will not allow you to do the same. A review of your content sources and your theoretical sources should be plenty for the purposes of the present research.

As you read the sources you find, you’ll start to understand what scholars before you have said about your topic. This process will do wonders for your understanding of the points YOU would like to make. When you have finished your literature review, you should have in your mind a very clear picture of what there is to know about your topic, and how your research makes that picture even clearer.