Tips and Strategies for Writing a Literature Review

(Adapted from http://www.duluth.umn.edu/~hrallis/guides/researching/litreview.html)

**What is a literature review?**

A literature review ismore than reciting what you have read about a topic. It focuses on a specific aspect of a topic, critically analyzes what researchers have said about this specific topic, and makes an argument usually pointing to the trends within the specific field. This is commonly expressed as the need for additional researchto better understand the issue.In applied disciplines, such as education, there is an additional set of implications related to practice.

The purpose of a literature review is NOT to prove a point or to make definitive statements about a topic. Without your own empirical data, you will NOT be able to make a claim, for example, about the relative worth of the communicative approach in an EFL context. Your task in a literature review is to tell the reader how researchers have dealt with the issue. You MUST cover the entire range of the research on a given topic and include all points of view (whether you agree with them or not).

There is a place for expressing an opinion on a given topic, but it is at the END of your argument. You HAVE TO write your paper in a way that signals to the reader that you have considered the entire range of the research on a given topic and have come to conclusions based upon it. You can bring in SOME of your own personal experiences as anecdotal evidence that corroborates what you have found in the literature. However, opinions in a literature review are commonly expressed tentatively. So, you might say, “based on the current trends in literature I have reviewed, I believe that it is most likely that…” Literature reviews almost always end with a statement as to the need for further research to explore various aspects related to the topic which may (or may not) corroborate your conclusions.

Of course, in your introduction (when you outline the organisation of your paper), you can signal to the reader what you ultimate conclusion will be. However, you merely make a statement and do not launch into your full argument until you have reviewed the literature. So, you might say, “this paper will review the academic literature connected to *such and such* by first doing *this* and then doing *that*. Based on this review and a brief examination my personal experiences related to this topic, I conclude this paper with a number of my personal reflections. I will conclude this paper with a set of recommendations related to future research and pedagogical practice.”

Using “I” statements (such as the one above) is currently acceptable in MOST current academic practice in the humanities. However, unless you are engaged in a methodology such as auto ethnography, one must be careful to frame “I” statements in such a way as to ensure that they do not distract from the main points you are making in your paper. In other words, be humble! So, for example, tell the reader at the beginning of your paper why you have chosen this topic, or tell the reader how your personal experiences corroborates the literature you have just reviewed. “I” statements should be like salt in your food. Too much makes you appear to be self-important and biased.

### **Step 1: Pick a topic and a controlling idea.**

**Make it sure the topic is focused, but not too focused.** For example, language and identity is too broad. There is heritage language learner identity, ESL newcomer identity, identity in local EFL contexts, study abroad language learning and identity, language teacher identity, language ideology and identity, code-switching and identity

* Narrow it down to one focused topic such as ELF learner identity in the Chinese context, or language and identity in the EFL classroom.
* Select a controlling idea that “drives” the topic. So, for example, what are the factors that influence or affect EFL identity in the Chinese context? Is it economics? Is it demographics? Is it policy? Is it electronic media? This will help you focus the topic on one specific area.

### **Step 2: Identify the literature that you will review**

1. Rely on peer reviewed academic journals, edited volumes or databases (found within library electronic sources). If you are not sure if the source is a peer reviewed , google the parent document and to find that information. Non-peer reviewed sources are acceptable if extremely relevant to your topic and argument. Non-peer reviewed sources should not make up the bulk of your review.
2. Google scholar is a good starting point. Then use the University of Ottawa library to access the articles.
3. Play with key words and descriptors to find articles (ex. Language learning, L2, language acquisition, SLA, language education). Also, play with key words and descriptors to narrow you search (EFL, China, Asia).
4. Stick mainly to recent articles (typically within the past 5-10 years),
5. But do not neglect older sources that are seminal to the field. So, make sure to find landmark studies and classic works upon which later empirical studies were conducted (ex. Language, identity, and investment, Norton, 1995).

### **Step 3: Analyze the literature**

Once you have found relevant articles, analyze and organize them before you begin writing.

1. Overview of the articles
* Read the abstract to identify the main focus, argument, methods, and findings.
* Try to answer these questions: What is the main point of the article? How does it contribute to scholarship on the topic? What purpose does it serve to your literature review? Write the answer to these questions in your notes
1. Decide which article are most relevant/relevant/irrelevant. Read what is (most) relevant and forget about the others.

Step 4: Read the important stuff CAREFULLY

* Take careful notes while reading.
* Look for key statistics and findings.
* Notice definitions of key concepts and theories.
* Notice similarities and differences in methods, participants, findings, and conclusions.
* Consider the strengths and weaknesses of each article. Why are certain articles more ‘convincing’ or ‘useful’ than others?
* Also pay attention to the limitations of the study typically discussed towards the end of the paper. This will be helpful in being ‘critical’.

Consider the following questions:

1. What are the major trends? Perhaps they focus on a particular age group, context, or perhaps they point to the same conclusion.
2. What are the inconsistencies? How do the articles and their findings differ?
3. Where is there a gap in the literature? Usually, this will be discussed in the limitations, implications, or conclusion.

Step 5: Developing an argument

What argument can you make? For example:

* The existing research has paid great attention to X but has overlooked Y. Additional research on Y is necessary to furthering our understanding on this topic because it is important for Z.
* Scholarship on X shows Y. Yet, there is little understanding from a Z perspective. We need to know more about the relationship between X and Z.
* The research on X seems in conclusive. Some findings show Y while others show Z. Further research is needed to get a better understanding of X.
* To date, the research has described the phenomenon of X is greater detail. However, there is little in terms of practical solutions of how X can be addressed in classroom teaching.
* In the past 15 years, there has been interest in X. But few scholars have considered the underlying causes of X. Without understanding causes, we cannot begin to resolve the negative consequences X produces.

**YOU NEED AN ARGUMENT!**

Step 6: Organizing the research and refining your argument

1. Based on your detailed notes, identify categories and themes (different topics, focuses, theories, methodologies, participant groups etc.)
2. Return to your argument and see if the research categorized in your themes/topics supports your argument.
3. Reconsider and revise as necessary.
4. Use an outline to organize the flow of the argument and the supporting research. Think about how each category supports the argument.

For example: The first group of studies shows that researchers were primarily interested in X and not Y. The second group of studies on X show focus on Z. Finally, the last group of studies look at Y but does not consider solutions to the problem.

Step 7: Writing the literature review

Introduction (1-2 pages)

* Clearly state the topic. What is the focus of the paper?
* Clearly state the importance of the topic. Why is this important to language education?
* Clearly state your argument? What is the main point of your paper? How will you prove this?
* Clearly state the organization of the paper and the flow of your argument.

Body (10 pages)

* Use heading and subheading to organize the paper
* Use topic sentences to introduce each section. (For example: The following section discusses research findings relating to X).
* Use transition sentences to conclude in section and connect to the next point. (For example: So far, this paper has discussed ABC. Now it will look at how other researchers have approached ABC from a DEF perspective).

Conclusion (1-2 pages)

* Briefly, summarize your main argument and the main points that support your arguments.
* Repeat and explain why your argument is important.
* Conclude with recommendations for future research or future practice.

IMPORTANT TECHNICAL ISSUES:

* Use APA and cite all sources used
* Use direct quotations sparingly, only for when extremely important information such as difference in definitions, to emphasize a point, or critical findings that are unusual
* Include a title page, running heads, pagination (upper right)
* 12 pt. font and double-spacing
* Between 3,000-5,000 words

Additional Reference

Galvan, J. (2006). Writing literature reviews: a guide for students of the behavioral sciences (3rd ed.). Glendale, CA: Pyrczak Publishing.