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# Writing the literature review

## Tips for academic librarians

One of the important elements of a research article is the literature review, yet few sources on writing spend much time talking about how to write this section of an article. General writing books usually do not talk about the academic research article and research methods books give the literature review short shrift. In *The librarian's guide to writing for publication,* Rachel Singer Gordon notes that "the literature review both shows that you have done your homework and helps give your readers the background necessary to understand your own research."[1] Ronald R. Powell, in *Basic research methods for librarians,* includes a short paragraph in which he notes that the literature review describes the foundation for the author's proposed study in the work of others, and that it should evaluate their methodologies and findings and discuss how the new study will differ.[2] While this is good advice as far as it goes, the ways in which a writer actually accomplishes this goal remain unspoken. For new academic writers, a few practical tips might be helpful.

### How to begin

The first requirement for writing a good literature review, of course, is to do a good literature search. Most librarians know how to do this, but it is worth repeating that not all relevant literature is necessarily to be found in the library science indexes. Think about your study in terms of what other fields it might be related to and try searching databases for those fields. For instance, when I began studying foreign language use by humanities scholars, a search of the literature of the foreign language teaching field proved very fruitful; statistics on language class college enrollments have been collected on a regular basis for more than 30 years and were useful in the discussion of the study results.

What if there is very little on your topic in the literature to review? If you have tried alternative terms and concepts with no success, you may need to broaden your search to a larger concept so that you can put your topic in some kind of context. Remember that academic writing for publication means that you are joining a scholarly conversation; just as you would not jump into a conversation with a group of people without listening long enough to know what the conversation was about, you do not want to jump into the scholarly conversation without relating what you are doing to what has been done before.[3]

The opposite problem, an overabundance of literature, can be equally difficult. For a study using citation analysis to investigate the use of foreign languages by humanities scholars, my coauthor and I collected articles on citation analysis as a method, studies of foreign language use, and articles on the research needs of humanities scholars.[4] In this case, selectivity is the key. The literature review does not have to be exhaustive, as it would be for a dissertation. Try to cite only the most relevant and the most important studies that provide the background and

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demonstrate the relevance and uniqueness of your study.

## Tips for staying organized

When you have a large amount of literature to work with, staying organized as you read through it is essential. One way of doing this is to create notecards or Pro-Cite entries for each article or book as you read it. In addition to noting the full citation (which will save time when compiling the works cited), make a one-sentence summary of the article's importance for your study, including any numerical results you will want to compare with your results, and assign a keyword for the broad topic it should be grouped with. Doing this immediately after reading the article helps you to assimilate what you have read, and will save a lot of re-reading.

When it comes time to write the literature review, the notecards or database entries can be sorted by topic and each topic can be sifted for the most relevant articles that should be mentioned. Seeing the summaries of all the articles on one topic together makes this decision easier than if each article were considered individually. Take one group and write succinctly about the articles in that group, considering their methodologies and results and their relation to your study. Follow with the next group, and so on.

## Use only what's relevant

When writing about the articles in a group, it is important to remember that this is not a book report. You do not need to dutifully report on everything covered by the author. The emphasis should be on the article's relation to your work; readers interested in further details may look up the article from your citation.

On the other hand, lists of authors and articles with no detail on their methodology or approach to your topic are not very useful to the reader; you do not need to prove that you have read everything. Instead, try to group the articles you have chosen in a logical way and write just enough about each so that the reader sees why you have chosen them for your study.

The standard format for articles that report the results of data-driven studies is: introduction and statement of the problem, literature review, methodology, results and discussion, conclusion. This format may be modified, however, to better present your study. For an article I coauthored on analyzing citation practice in eight humanities fields, we found literature about each of the eight fields. Reporting on all of it at the beginning of the article made for tedious reading, and the results of previous studies were too far away from the results in our article for comparison; therefore, we changed the format and reported on the relevant literature for each field at the beginning of the section, reporting the results for that field. Each literature review was brief and comparison of results was facilitated.[5] Articles that are not reporting results of data collection may also be a little more flexible in reporting on the previous literature. Discussion of previous work can be embedded in the text as the topic treated by that work arises, but the same principles of selectivity and succinctness apply.

With careful attention to selectivity, organization and brevity of writing, the literature review section of an article need not be a dull chore to wade through, for writer or reader, but rather can provide the foundation for the study. It contributes to answering the question of why you undertook the study, and what had not been addressed in previous studies. It also gives readers a little more than the author-title-keyword entries found in indexes, so that they can evaluate whether they want to find the articles in order to further pursue their interest in the topic. In this way, ideas for new studies are generated, and the scholarly conversation continues.

## Notes

1. Rachel Singer Gordon, *The librarian's guide to writing for publication* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2004): 76.

2. Ronald R. Powell, *Basic research methods for librarians,* 3rd ed. (Greenwich, Conn.: Ablex Publications, 1997): 205.

*(continued on page 534)*

that follow far outweigh any reasons for not doing it.

• The opportunity to work with students on an extended basis is perhaps the best reason. The standard librarian-student meeting may only be a one-time interaction. We do a good job in that short interlude, but becoming more deeply involved with our students speaks volumes to them about their library and their institution. Giving students a chance to interact with librarians outside normal work venues allows them to see us in a different perspective; and, through relationships developed in class, they're more likely to visit the library and ask for research help.

• The faculty status of librarians is further validated with other faculty and the administration.

• The academic curricular offerings are broadened; typically our hobbies and personal research interests are not covered in the classroom. For example, living in the Northeast means I'm able to make maple syrup in the springtime. It's a process that involves science, history, retail knowledge, physical work, and good food—and it's been an optimal focus for a seminar. I've taught it twice and each time the course quickly filled to capacity during registration.

• It gives librarians the chance to experience classroom teaching problems and situations; plus it offers the practice of creating a syllabus, working with the registrar's office, and using the library from the classroom faculty perspective. It's refreshing to design your own course and assignments compared to the sometimes stifling experience of relying on the wishes of another faculty member who brings a class to the library for instruction on research methods.

• Students can help conduct research. I previously taught an honors class that investigated student life 100 years ago[5] and, as university archivist, I was able to use the resulting research compilations to augment the university's understanding of its history. While the students chose their own topics, I was delighted to be left with their results.

• Teaching an "outside the box" course is certainly good publicity for the library and a strong addition to any promotion and tenure documentation.

• Receiving extra compensation for teaching a seminar isn't bad either!

## Conclusion

Honors programs offer the ideal opportunity to share our diversity of knowledge and areas of personal interest with students while reaping our own benefits. Since teaching is already a large part of an academic librarian's normal duties, why not try a semester-long course? You just might like it!

## Notes

1. Jimmy Ghapery, "There's an 800-pound gorilla in our stacks: An information literacy case study of Google," *C&RL News* 65, no. 10 (2004): 582–84.

2. The National Collegiate Honors Council Web site can be found at www.nchchonors.org.

3. Information about the Alfred University honors program can be found at www.alfred.edu/academics/html/honors_program.html.

4. Riddle answer: You don't get down from a horse, you get down from a goose!

5. Laurie L. McFadden, "Making history live: How to get students interested in university archives," *C&RL News* 59, no. 6 (1998): 423–25.

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*("Writing the literature review" cont. from page 527)*

3. Anne Sigismund Huff, *Writing for scholarly publication* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1999).

4. Charlene Kellsey and Jennifer Knievel, "Global English in the humanities: A longitudinal citation study of foreign language use by humanities scholars," *College & Research Libraries* 65, no. 3 (May 2004): 194–204.

5. Jennifer Knievel and Charlene Kellsey, "Citation analysis for collection development: A comparative study of eight humanities fields," *Library Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (Apr. 2005): forthcoming.