



## Literature Reviews: Purpose and Key Moves<sup>1</sup>

### Definition

A literature review reflects the idea that scholarship is a cumulative enterprise. In a literature review, a scholar demonstrates that his or her own research depends on and grows out of existing theories and research. As a purposeful overview of the key trends, strengths, and weaknesses of existing research, a literature review provides the necessary terrain that leads to the writer's own contribution to a growing body of knowledge.

### Purpose of a Literature Review

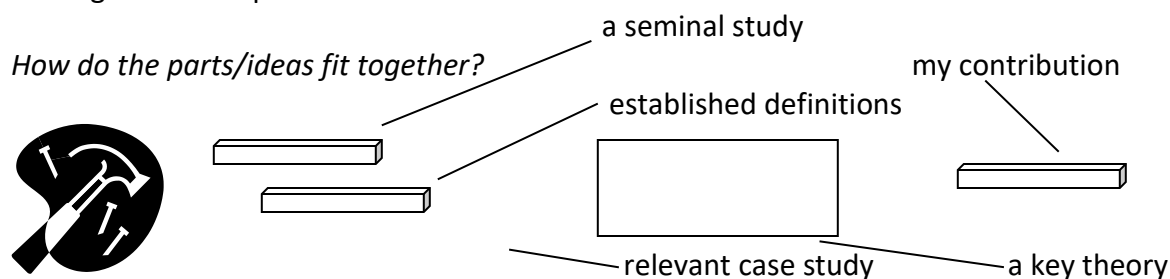
- To provide necessary background information.
- To establish the importance of and your familiarity with a topic.
- To “carve out a space” for further work and allow you to situate your proposed research in the context of an existing scholarly conversation.
- To provide a roadmap leading to and justifying your research as the next logical step.

### Four Key Moves: Selling Your Idea

1. Establish a research territory.
2. Review and *purposefully reorganize* the relevant literature – contextualize your research.
3. Establish a niche – *turn* the discussion with an observation that signals to the reader a gap, problem, or deficiency in the current state of knowledge.
4. Occupy the niche – signal how your contribution responds to the gap, problem, or deficiency.

### Analogy of the Prefabricated Table

Think of a literature review as a prefabricated kitchen table. The successful review logically combines already existing pieces of information and demonstrates how the writer's contribution will complete the assembled table. Readers don't want the burden of figuring out how these pieces of information relate, and they don't want to be confused by extra screws, legs, and wrenches. The literature review should present a carefully constructed table, not a catalogue of table parts.



<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Penn State University's "Strategies for Writing Literature Reviews" handout, available at <http://composition.la.psu.edu>, and from Howard S. Becker's *Writing for Social Scientists*.

## Anatomy of a Literature Review<sup>2</sup>

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### **Introduction**

*\*Provide an overview of the kitchen table.*

- *Establish a research territory:* Define or identify the general topic, issue, or area of concern, thus providing an appropriate context for reviewing the literature.
- *Briefly establish a niche:* Point out overall trends in what has been published about the topic; or conflicts in theory, methodology, evidence, and conclusions; or gaps in research and scholarship; or a single problem or new perspective of immediate interest.
- *Briefly occupy the niche:* Establish your reason for reviewing the literature (point of view). What conclusion should your readers draw as a result of reading your review?

### **Body**

*\*Review the literature to contextualize your work – describe how the prefabricated pieces of the table fit together.*

*\*Identify what piece of the table is needed. TURN the discussion to establish a niche – identify the gap, problem, or deficiency your work will address.*

*\*Begin to occupy the niche – describe how your work will respond to the gap, problem, or deficiency.*

- Group/organize research studies and other types of literature (reviews, theoretical articles, case studies, etc.) according to common denominators such as qualitative versus quantitative approaches, conclusions of authors, specific purpose or objective, chronology, etc.
- Summarize individual studies or articles with as much or as little detail as each merits according to its comparative importance in the literature.
- Establish the relationships (commonalities, differences, patterns, trends, gaps) among sources and between your research and the sources reviewed.
- Provide the reader with strong “umbrella” sentences at the beginnings of paragraphs, “signposts” throughout, and brief “so what” summary sentences at intermediate points in the review to aid in understanding comparisons and analyses.

### **Conclusion**

*\*Highlight the niche and your effort to fill it.*

- Summarize the main findings of your review, i.e. summarize major contributions of significant studies and articles to the body of knowledge under review, maintaining the focus established in the introduction.
- Evaluate the current state of this body of knowledge, pointing out major methodological flaws for gaps in the research, inconsistencies in theory and findings, and areas or issues pertinent to your research.
- Conclude by reiterating the relationship between the central topic of the literature review and your proposed research. Answer the question: So what?

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Penn State University’s “Strategies for Writing Literature Reviews” handout, available at <http://composition.la.psu.edu>, and from The University of Wisconsin Online Writing Center, available at <http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/ReviewofLiterature.html>