

Writing a Literature Review: Six Steps to Get You from Start to Finish [feedly]

Notebook: Communication

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As [Get a Life, PhD](#) is approaching two million (!!) page views, I am pulling out some of the 'Greatest hits' from the archive. The post below is the most read post of all time on this blog, with over 125,000 views. I often share this post with my students as they embark on their first literature reviews. And, we read [Foss and Walters'](#) book every year in my graduate [Writing and Publishing](#) class.

Writing a literature review is often the most daunting part of writing an article, book, thesis, or dissertation. "The literature" seems (and often is) massive. I have found it helpful to be as systematic as possible in doing this gargantuan task. This post describes one system for writing a literature review.

In their book, [Destination Dissertation: A Traveler's Guide to a Done Dissertation](#), Sonja Foss and William Walters describe a highly efficient way of writing a literature review. I think it provides an excellent guide for getting through the massive amounts of literature for any purpose: in a doctorate program, for writing an M.A. thesis, or an article in any field of study.

Step One: Decide on your areas of research

Before you begin to search for articles or books, decide beforehand what areas you are going to research. Make sure that you only get articles and books in those areas, even if you come across fascinating books in other areas.

Step Two: Search for the literature:

Conduct a comprehensive bibliographic search of books and articles in your area. Read the abstracts online and download and/or print those articles that pertain to your area of research. Find books in the library that are relevant and check them out. Set a specific time frame for how long you will search. It should not take more than two or three dedicated time sessions.

Step Three: Find relevant excerpts in your books and articles:

Skim the contents of each book and article and look specifically for these five things:

Claims, conclusions, and findings about the constructs you are investigating
Definitions of terms
Calls for follow-up studies relevant to your project
Gaps you notice in the literature
Disagreement about the constructs you are investigating

When you find any of these five things, type the relevant excerpt directly into a Word document.

Don't summarize, as summarizing takes longer than simply typing the excerpt. Make sure to note the name of the author and the page number following each excerpt. Do this for each article and book that you have in your stack of literature. When you are done, print out your excerpts.

Step Four: Code the literature

Get out a pair of scissors and cut each excerpt out. Now, sort the pieces of paper into similar topics. Figure out what the main themes. Place each excerpt into a themed pile. Make sure each note goes into a pile. If there are excerpts that you can't figure out where they belong, separate those and go over them again at the end to see if you need new categories. When you finish, place each stack of notes into an envelope labeled with the name of the theme.

Step Five: Create Your Conceptual Schema

Type, in large font, the name of each of your coded themes. Print this out, and cut the titles into individual slips of paper. Take the slips of paper to a table or large workspace and figure out the best way to organize them. Are there ideas that go together or that are in dialogue with each other? Are there ideas that contradict each other? Move around the slips of paper until you come up with a way of organizing the codes that makes sense. Write the conceptual schema down before you forget or someone cleans up your slips of paper!

Step Six: Begin to Write Your Literature Review

Choose any section of your conceptual schema to begin with. You can begin anywhere, because you already know the order. Find the envelope with the excerpts in them and lay them on the table in front of you. Figure out a mini-conceptual schema based on that theme by grouping together those excerpts that say the same thing. Use that mini-conceptual schema to write up your literature review based on the excerpts that you have in front of you. Don't forget to include the citations as you write, so as not to lose track of who said what. Repeat this for each section of your literature review.

Once you complete these six steps, you will have a complete draft of your literature review. The great thing about this process is that it breaks down into manageable steps something that seems enormous: writing a literature review.

I think that Foss and Walter's system for writing the literature review really can work for a dissertation, because a Ph.D. candidate has already read widely in his or her field through graduate seminars and comprehensive exams.

It may be more challenging for M.A. students, unless you are already familiar with the literature. It is always hard to figure out how much you need to read for deep meaning, and how much you just need to know what others have said. That balance will depend on how much you already know.

For faculty writing literature reviews for articles or books, this system also could work, especially when you are writing in a field with which you are already familiar. The mere fact of having a system can make the literature review seem much less daunting, so I recommend this system for anyone who feels overwhelmed by the prospect of writing a literature review.

PS: A spot has just opened up in the [Creative Connections Retreat](#). Apply soon if you are interested.

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