**Writing a Literature Review**

**AIMS:**

* Explain what a literature review is.
* Help students understand how to write a good literature review.

**Lecture:**

Outline the six components of the lecture: What is a literature review? , Selecting Articles to Review and Structure of a Literature Review (which includes phrases which can be useful when writing a literature review)

**What is a literature review?**

A literature review is a summary and critical analysis of writings by scholars on a particular topic/theme. It is a combination of i) what has already been written on the topic, ii) an identification and discussion on what has not been written on the topic and/or iii) conceptual/methodological weaknesses of the literature, and finally iv) how you will address the weaknesses or gaps in the existing knowledge base. A literature review does not simply reproduce/summarise the literature; it is both descriptive and analytical.

*Descriptive:*

* Discuss the most widely accepted findings on the topic.
* State the most widely accepted definitions of concepts, hypotheses etc. in relation to your topic.
* Identify the methods used to make and support the findings in the literature.
* Establish the most recent authoritative theory on the subject.

*Analytical:*

* The integration of ideas from different sources, highlighting differences and similarities.
* Showing the relevance of the literature to your research topic. (how it supports & is contradictory to your main hypothesis)
* Illustrate which arguments are most important/ pertinent in the field of study – using examples/primary sources to do so.

**Selecting Articles to Review**

There are hundreds of sources for most topics/research areas, even if you read all of them; it would be very hard to include all of these in your review. The aim is not to discuss every single article, but the major opinions/themes on the topic, in fact many of the sources will not add a substantial amount of new information, and would only serve to illustrate the number of sources which subscribe to or support that particular view/methodology. The main articles you should aim to use in your review are the ‘seminal’ articles, referenced by most authors in the particular field/topic you are researching.

*For Example:*

*Please change the themes below to those relevant to your course.*

It is difficult to discuss the following topics without these authors:

Authority: Weber

Separation of Powers: Gwyn

Knowledge & Power: Foucault

Democracy: Huntington

**Finding Sources:**

The UCT library website has a link to a database (ISI Citation Database) which can find all other articles which have cited a particular article.

*(Offer to place the following link on Vula)*

Link: <http://apps.webofknowledge.com.ezproxy.uct.ac.za/WOS_GeneralSearch_input.do?product=WOS&search_mode=GeneralSearch&SID=T1BFZJEOUX8vOdFsoMN&preferencesSaved>=

* Go to ‘cited reference search’
* Type the author’s last name, the journal & year in which the article appeared in the appropriate boxes
* This will give you a list of authors and articles which have followed or disagreed with the author.

Google Scholar (‘Cited by’ link) and the Academic Search Premier on the UCT library website (‘cited references’ link) have similar functions.

**Selecting sources:**

The process below will assist students in choosing from the list of sources.

1. *Preview:*

Go through the titles of the readings, narrow down to the ones you think are most relevant.

Read:

* The title and author details,
* the abstract (if there is one),
* read the main headings and subheadings and any highlighted text,
* examine any illustrations and graphs tables or diagrams and their captions

1. Overview:

The aim is to get a bigger picture or gist of the text. To do so, skimming and scanning the text is useful.

*Skimming:* the aim here is to run through the text quickly in order to get a general idea of what it is about. Focus on the introduction, sub-headings, first few lines of paragraphs, and conclusion. By reading the first few lines of the different paragraphs: you get a general overall idea of what the chapter is about.

*Scanning:* After gaining an overview and skimming, identify the section(s) of the text that you probably need to read. Start scanning the text by allowing your eyes (or finger) to move quickly over a page - looking for certain words or points in the text, rather than an overall idea of the text. You might for example be looking for what a particular author has to say about ‘globalisation’, you would then scan for the word globalisation within the text. Once you’ve found the word, the paragraphs/ lines around it should be read, rather than reading the whole page/section/ chapter.

1. Inview:

Intensive reading, allows for a deep understanding of the final texts you’ve chosen. This refers to reading the whole text and making notes of the key points.

How to read intensively:

* Start at the beginning. Underline any unfamiliar words or phrases, but do not stop the flow of your reading.
* If the text is relatively easy, underline, highlight or make brief notes.
* If the text is difficult, read it through at least once (depending on the level of difficulty) before making notes.
* Be alert to the main ideas. Each paragraph should have a main idea, often contained in the topic sentence (usually the first sentence) or the last sentence.
* When you have finished go back to the unfamiliar vocabulary. Look it up in an ordinary or subject-specific dictionary. If the meaning of a word or passage still evades you, leave it and read on. Perhaps after more reading you will find it more accessible and the meaning will become clear. Speak to your tutor if your difficulty continues.

**Structure of a Literature Review**

***Introduction:***

*Using the example below, go through the main aspects of the introduction.*

* Discuss the central theme/topic (context).
* Highlight the overall trends/main themes in the literature: conclusions made, conflicts in theory, methodology, evidence or the gaps or weaknesses in the literature.
* There must be a thesis statement for the literature review. The thesis statement does not necessarily have to present an argument or position, but can simply argue for a particular perspective on the material (e.g. agree with 1 group of scholars).
* Give a general outline of how you will review this literature and why.

Phrases and sentences for academic writing

* *Providing a context*
* Recent work in the field has shown that
* It is generally assumed/known that…
* *Situating your writing/stating your aim*
* This review considers….
* This discussion focuses on…
* *Outlining the structure*
* The review is divided into three main sections. Firstly…..is considered; secondly, ……is analysed and finally………. is done.
* This review first considers…….and then…….

**Example: Introduction**

The Neopatrimonial School refers to literature that attributes Africa’s poor political and economic record to Neopatrimonialism, which is said to have weakened the state’s capability to foster development and economic growth. Increasingly arguments have emerged which challenge this view on the basis of the very utility of the concept as an explanatory tool in Africa. The main argument is that neopatrimonialism merely describes the style of governance in a country, but does not indicate the type of strategies or policies a state will pursue and with what success. This paper aims to review these two contrasting sets of literature in order to illustrate that Neopatrimonialism does not necessarily lead to underdevelopment. The review first highlights the main arguments of the neopatrimonial school and critiques these arguments by reflecting on the contrasting emerging literature.

***Body:***

* Discuss the sources. This can be done in subsections, grouping various works thematically /major debates in the literature, chronologically/ the intellectual progression of the field or methodologically.

*Illicit responses from the class on the definition and examples of a chronological, thematic and methodological approach to writing a literature review. Please change the examples below to content relevant to your course:*

1. *Chronological:* organise your review according to when the sources were published, only do this if the order demonstrates an important trend. You can also organise the sources chronologically according to the history of the topic.

Example: Developmental States in Africa,

1. 1964-1989: the authoritarian advantage: the success of the East Asian Tigers.
2. 1990- date: democracy is crucial to development: democratic developmental states.

This approach could combine sources written at different time periods within one section, and a discussion on the reasons for the changes in the literature and arguments made. What happened in 1989/1990?

1. *Thematic:* organise your review according to main themes/ issues that arise in the literature.

Example: ‘Understanding Botswana’s Economic Growth’

Literature on this topic cites the following main themes:

1. Good Leadership
2. Resource Wealth
3. Foreign Aid/Assistance.
4. *Methodological:* this approach focuses less on the content of the literature and more on the methods of the researchers. It is used when discussing interdisciplinary approaches to a topic or discussing studies with different approaches to analysing/explaining the topic.

Example: Measuring Development

A social lens versus a more economic approach to measuring development and how that affects the conclusions made in the different sets of literature

**S**en’s Development as Freedom vs Measuring development through GDP growth.

* Summarise the articles with as much detail as each article merits.
* Identify consistent patterns and points of agreement & inconsistencies, disagreement & unresolved issues across these texts to establish what is known.
* Read widely but make sure to only use the most significant and relevant sources of information to date.
* Each paragraph should have a topic sentence and a clear main idea.
* Pay attention to the vocabulary you use to aid in your overall analysis.

Phrases and sentences for academic writing

* *Referring to another authors ideas*
* Weber put forward the idea that….
* In Mkandawire’s view……
* According to Chang’s perspective…….
* Khadiagala argues that….
* *Providing support*
* Fombad’s findings (2001) support this idea.
* For example in 1984…
* This shows that….
* *Making a concession*
* Good’s study provides much relevant information.
* Taylor makes several interesting points…
* Parson argues convincingly
* *Showing Disagreement*
* There are several flaws in Nwabueze’s argument.
* While the discussion makes some good points, there are serious problems.
* Peterson’s argument cannot be accepted for several reasons.
* *Comparing*
* Whereas Molomo argues for……….., Samatar presents a case against it.
* Botswana is considered to have a good democracy, however….
* *Weakening a statement*
* Naidoo’s argument is not completely valid because….
* This is possibly a result of…….as a result of…

***Conclusion:***

* Summary of what you have drawn from the literature: e.g. major methodological flaws, gaps in the research, inconsistencies in the findings and therefore areas that are pertinent to future study of the topic.
* Where might the discussion proceed; identify the gap your work will fill/ if your purpose was simply to identify the gaps in the literature, discuss the importance of filling these gaps.
* *Remember to:* maintain the focus established in your Introduction.

This lesson plan is based on content in:

Hurst, Ellen. 2011. *Academic Literacy Workshops: a handbook for students and instructors.* Cape Town: University of Cape Town.



This lesson plan is licenced under the Creative Commons Attribution South Africa License. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/za/>

Or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California 94105, USA.