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Writing a Literature Review

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The purpose of this article is to help students understand the main components of a literature review within the context of a larger writing project, such as an article or dissertation, and learn how to write a literature review at the graduate level.

Recreating the Conversation

The literature review is a synthesis essay that introduces your reader to the current discourse on a particular subject and establishes the scholarly context for your thesis. Its main function is to survey, evaluate, and bring together the sources you have collected in your research. A literature review provides your reader with an overview of the scholarship on your topic and explains how these scholars are in conversation with one another. In a literature review, you should also demonstrate how you add to, improve, or respond to existing research.

One Sentence at a Time

The first crucial element of writing a literature review is briefly summarizing and evaluating each source. Often, this starts when a writer composes an annotated bibliography. In these summaries, your goal is to show how each source contributes to the scholarship on your topic and to assess the value of that contribution. For instance, what does John Doe argue about the efficacy of unions as instruments of political advocacy, and how does his argument agree with Jane Smith's? Additionally, you should identify gaps in each source's research or argument (i.e., unanswered questions, underdeveloped points, possible counterarguments). This will prepare you to discuss these sources in relation to one another.

Just as important is to explain how each of your sources builds on or responds to one another. Scholarship is often referred to as a discourse, meaning that scholars who study the same subject will be in dialogue with one another. It is crucial to assess how your sources engage with each other and analyze how the scholarly discourse has progressed. How do your scholars interact? Do they agree or disagree? Do they *concur*, *conflict*, or *complicate* each other's positions?

Once your readers understand the current scholarly discourse, you may introduce your thesis, argument, and approach. Discuss how *you* are contributing to the scholarship. How are you building on or questioning the research? What gap are you trying to fill? How will your approach improve the scholarly discussion on your topic? The literature review seeks to locate the reader in the existing research at this moment in time and projects how the writer will add to the current body of knowledge.

Examples

Imagine you are writing a literature review for a seminar paper in your British Literature course. In your literature review, you are analyzing two scholars who have written about Dorothy Sayers. To discuss how these sources engage with each other, you might state this:

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Mira Thatcher bases her discussion on the belief that Dorothy Sayers is a feminist. However, Jane Howard challenges this premise, saying Sayers's letters and novels demonstrate that she is a humanist.

Note how these sentences describe each scholar's position and how one responds to the other. Using the same situation, imagine you are trying to transition from your discussion of the scholarship to an explanation of your thesis and approach.

Though many scholars such as Thatcher, Howard, and Williams have examined Sayers's portrayal of gender and gender roles, few have explored how Sayers uses the detective novel genre to transcend gender conflict and assert equality. In this thesis, I will argue that Sayers transcends tensions in traditional gender roles by promoting gender interdependency in the crime-solving process.

These sentences summarize what scholarship has said about the topic and explain the gap that the author aims to fill.

Tips

1. Pay attention to bibliographies. These will show you which sources are utilizing each other's research.
2. Take note of research trends. If you notice that multiple sources have made common observations, it may represent a trend in the scholarship that you should highlight.
3. Utilize current research as much as possible. Your thesis does not have to be an entirely new thought; you can build on the conclusions of other scholars.
4. Since you are recreating the scholarly conversation, keep in mind that nearly every sentence of a literature review will require an in-text citation.

Works Consulted

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