

# Finding your way through the literature review

Joining the conversation and making your voice heard in research writing

Ms Sherran Clarence: UWC Writing Centre  
sclarence@uwc.ac.za

# Starting points: a writing and thinking exercise

- Finish these sentences to tell a story about your proposed research project. This is a starting point for writing an abstract for your research report.

Once upon a time researchers thought that...

But then I/we thought that maybe...

So what I/we am/are going to do is...

And what I/we hope I/we will discover is...

Which will change the way we think about...

# Abstracts: more formally

- An abstract needs to provide an overview for the reader of the whole paper/report.
  - What conversation are you engaging/what prior research is your paper connecting with? What is your angle? (LOCATE)
  - Identify the particular problem or question or issue that your paper will explore? (FOCUS)
  - Summarise major findings and outline research approach taken, sample, method of analysis (REPORT)
  - Open up the argument and return to your angle – what will your analysis show? What will your contribution be? (ARGUE) (Kamler and Thomson 2004)

# Why do we need a literature review?

- they introduce us to other thinkers and writers in our field of research
- they help us to understand and locate the problem or question we are interested in researching
- they show us other studies similar to ours, so we can look at the most widely accepted theoretical or methodological approaches to the research
- they introduce the reader to the problem we are researching, and synthesise and relate current knowledge and research to our own project, so the reader (and we) have a framework for the project

# What is a literature review, then?

- 'A literature review is a synthesis of:  
What has already been written on the topic;  
What has not been written on that topic (or is written in such a way that it is conceptually or methodologically unsound or incomplete);  
How the researcher's proposal addresses the 'gap', silence or weakness in the existing knowledge base' (Hurst, 2012)
- So, it shows the reader what you have read on the topic, that you understand some of the key issues on the topic, and where some of the gaps are that your research can fill.
- It creates a solid foundation for your research.

# What is your objective in writing a literature review?

- You need to have a thesis - not necessarily making an argument for your opinion or position on the topic, but arguing for a particular stance on the readings you have done.
- You need to be critical of the readings: you are not just summarising their main points - you are relating the main points to your own research. But you must capture the main ideas accurately in summary form in order to do this.
- You need to indicate clearly a voice of your own - you need to show what the gap is that your research will try to fill, and how the literature on the topic is helping you to make sense of the gap, and the methods and theories that will guide your project.

# So, how do we do this?

## Summary and synthesis writing

- A summary is an accurate and concise capturing of information contained in a text, like a book chapter or journal article. It contains only the main points from the text, and tells the reader what the author's overall aim in writing that text was.
- A synthesis is more than this. A synthesis is where the writer uses two or more summaries to develop a stance on a particular topic. It contains the writer's opinion, and uses the summaries to substantiate that. It often compares and contrasts ideas raised by authors that have been summarised, and uses only the ideas that are relevant to the research being written about.
- **A good literature review includes both summary and synthesis writing.**

# Useful strategies for writing a good literature review

1. Write a clear introduction that tells your reader what your research question is, and that explains what the main points or ideas are that you will be discussing briefly, and why you are using these ideas.
2. Look at the summaries that you have written on the readings you have read. You are looking for two things: one is the main ideas or concepts or arguments that you are using to help you understand your own research. The other is where the authors say the same things and where they say things that are different. Make notes on these two issues.
3. Now write paragraphs, each developing one idea. Each paragraph should begin and end with your own 'voice', and needs to draw on the summaries and author's voices where needed to support and explain the claims you make.
4. Link your paragraphs together so that your reader goes with you on a 'journey' through the relevant literature. You need to explain to them what information you are using, how that information is contributing to your research, and what your research is going to be about and why you are doing it.



# Tool 1: A reading journal

Point: to help you make sense of what you read, to develop your ability to summarise, interpret and analyse readings, to learn how to write about what you read in your own voice.

1. Get a clean journal/exercise book. Find a comfortable place to sit. Put away your pens and highlighter
2. Read your article or chapter all the way through the first time – don't stop at things you don't understand (yet)
3. At the top of a clean page, write the full reference and then start writing to yourself about the article - what were the main points and ideas, what was interesting or related to your research topic, and what else it made you think of etc.
4. You can then go back and read again and work out all the tough bits – make more detailed notes if you need to, and pull out useful quotes.

# Tool 2: PEE for paragraph writing

- **P is for POINT**
  - This is usually in your own voice. What point or claim do you want to make to build your response to your assignment question? Each paragraph must have at least ONE main point that is being developed.
- **E is for EVIDENCE**
  - All claims you make need to be supported by evidence – this usually comes from the readings you have done, or research.
- **E is for EXPLANATION**
  - Your claims and evidence also need to be explained and elaborated on in the context of the assignment you are writing. Again, this is you, but perhaps also sometime supported by others.

# Example of P E E in action

- Most students struggle, when entering university, to shift from their 'high school' style of learning to one more appropriate for university studies. Barker (2006), in his research at UJ with first year students, found that it took most first years students at least 6-9 months to start approaching their research and studying differently. Marks and Spencer (2005) in a similar study in the UK with non-traditional students, found that students tended to cling to the ways of studying learned at school because they didn't understand what was expected of them at university. Essentially, what these studies are arguing is that students who enter university for the first time have study habits and approaches that are not always suited to the ways of learning expected from university students. For example, students in high school are not often asked to give reasons for their claims from texts that are then referenced, but at university, all claims and opinions have to be supported by evidence from texts that is referenced.

# Further example of a form of PEE in action

- Knowledge conceived of in the neo-conservative way has been approached with caution by more student-centred and 'authentic' approaches to learning. This is partly because knowledge here is understood as the 'canon' in different disciplines, and as such may be abstract and have little practical applicability to the real world, or connection to students' prior knowledge (Jonassen and Land 1999; Lombardi 2007; Mims 2003). Those who critique this type of curriculum claim that it privileges those who are already the elite in socioeconomic or cultural terms, and that it does not go far enough to prepare graduates for employment. An elite curriculum with very clear and strong disciplinary boundaries, and very little space for engagement with more 'everyday' knowledge and learning outside of the lecture halls or academy, tends to privilege a few and exclude many by making the basis for success access to privileged forms of 'cultural' and 'social capital' (Bourdieu 1988) rather than other ways of knowing or kinds of knowledge and skills (Young and Muller 2010). In the case of South Africa this kind of curriculum would exclude many students who may gain entry to university but do not come from socioeconomic or educational backgrounds that give them this kind of capital, or at least, enough of it to make the transition to university successfully.

# Tool 3: MSWord tools

- **Spelling**: use the spell check but set to South African or UK spelling first
- **Grammar**: use the grammar checker, but use it carefully – it doesn't always know what it's talking about!
- **Formatting**: set yourself a format before you start writing. **Recommendation**: 12 size font; Arial or Times New Roman; 12pt spacing between paragraphs; double line spacing; Justified.

# Further advice

- **Critical friends:** find a reader – someone you trust and who will give you constructive criticism as well as praise – to read your work and give you critical but helpful feedback
- **Proofread:** read your writing out loud to yourself or your critical friend before you submit – check for typos and errors you can correct