

Collecting your Ideas in a Coherent Structure for the Literature Chapter

The amount of information you collect about your subject when reading for a master's or doctoral degree can be overwhelming. Organizing that information into a coherent structure for a literature review can involve an immense amount of effort and frustration. When writing the literature review, you must allow yourself to be guided by the problem statement because everything you say must support the problem statement.

Where to start?

An annotated bibliography is an excellent way of becoming familiar with your subject. It also allows you to keep accurate records so that when you gather your thoughts together to start the writing process, the information is on hand. An annotated bibliography allows you to record the essence of the reading, to record direct quotes and page numbers for citations, and of course to keep an exact record of the reference information. It means you will never have to go hunting for something you read somewhere. The information will always be at your finger tips. The reason for being so precise with your information gathering is to allow a slow percolation of ideas to happen, a steady filtering process. With time, themes and patterns will start emerging.

1. A good literature review is not a blow-by-blow account of everything you have read about the subject.
2. Nor is it a reformulated or edited annotated bibliography.

So what is a literature review?

The literature review is a carefully crafted argument in which the information about your subject is arranged in a manner that explores and supports the problem statement.

1. That means the literature should be arranged in terms of themes.
2. If you find yourself listing your reading either alphabetically or chronologically, you have not found the essence of your reading.
3. It is also not enough to say an author or researcher said or did this or that. A chapter too reliant on quotes does not allow for your own voice.
4. The idea is to demonstrate how that research is relevant to your own research.
5. Most importantly, you will never include everything you have read. That is a clear sign that you are listing and not selecting.

Let's recap and think of the process of creating a literature review slightly differently.

Step 1 of constructing the literature review chapter is to have a very **clear idea of the problem statement** and the various concepts that would need to be included in order to contextualize and explore that problem fully. Very often, these concepts are the search keys to access the literature. Sometimes when reading an article, you would add a search word to the list that the literature indicated is important.

Step 2 is to know what you have read and to **organize the literature** so that you can find the information you need to construct your argument. One way to really come to know the literature is to write an annotated bibliography, which is a very formal and academically rigorous and sound exercise. It is a really useful method if you do not have hard copy of the literature that you can physically write on. If you have your own hard copies, you can also come to know the literature by highlighting or listing the themes and relationships that the articles deal with on index cards or on the articles themselves, or simply sort the articles you have consulted into piles.

In **step 3**, the **list of themes** generated functions as a **framework** for constructing an outline for your literature review. The aim is to process your summaries of the literature read by extracting themes from the literature that are relevant for understanding and exploring the research problem.

An **important reminder** though: writing a literature review is an alchemical, not linear, process. It might seem as if you are working methodically from point A to point Z. But in fact, the links between concepts will come to you after intensive reading. They may pop out at you at any time: so be ready. In terms of what arises, you may have to go back and refine your problem statement. The process of being prepared to change and refine as needed, and of course the understanding that rewriting and refining is an ongoing, dynamic process is really reinforced when writing this chapter. What you start with is seldom what you end with. When you begin the writing itself, it is important to keep your focus on the problem statement and ask yourself at every step and before including anything: **What is the relevance of this to the research problem?** The focus on the problem statement guides your every step.

In summary, when writing the literature review, you must allow yourself to be guided by the problem statement because everything you say must support the problem statement: you must question the relevance of what you include, and you must arrange the material included in terms of themes that are relevant to the research problem.

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While on the website, a reminder to register and to collect your free self-editing guide. It contains all the myriad of tricks used extensively by serious writers. Some are wacky, but all work.