

Literature Review Workshop



TOPIC _____

TITLE _____

RESEARCH
QUESTION _____

RESPONSE TO RESEARCH QUESTION

(‘Thesis’ Statement / Central Claim)

AIMS &
OBJECTIVES _____

Reviewing the Literature for critical points of view – seeing/ reading between the lines

The literature is a multiplicity of voices. With each voice agendas emerge. Each text is itself a framing of voices and their agendas, shaped to present a debate slanted towards a conclusion. Within that debate can often be detected the friends, the strangers, the guests, the hosts and the enemies that are entertained by the writer. So, there is a problem. It is that whilst acts of framing bring and impose order, those very processes of ordering and categorisation select and edit so that some things are chosen to be foregrounded, others to be background and yet others to be excluded. In the writing task, agenda setting and framing pin possibilities and options down to what is regarded as 'realistic', 'plausible', 'do-able', 'true'. However, there has to be a moment when the literature appears like the vertigo experienced over a sheer and endless drop. Engagement with the literature is the essential step in widening out, indeed seeing the limitless possibilities for open debate with a public extending over centuries, even millennia. Making a voice map of the public space of debate is a way of trying to locate what is at stake in adopting a given way of framing the world and its agendas. Getting a sense of the historical development of major debates, discovering the tributaries, the dead ends, the forgotten, the overlooked, is all a part of the gradual sense of knowing where you are, where you stand, in relation to others. In particular, who claims to know what and why? What kinds of arguments are being made, and why? What are the assumptions at the back of explanations and theories? What happens if the assumptions are challenged or changed?

From a review of the literature it is possible to sketch and fill out the details of the problematic, that is, the knot of problems, issues, concerns, interests that each of the voices in the literature have historically addressed. In determining how they address their chosen problems, the outlines of their methodologies can be formulated. Then it is a question of what is at stake expressed by each voice in the choices they make in exploring, examining and forming their conclusions using their chosen methodologies in relation to the problems they address. Which voices have they included in their own reviews of the debates, which have they excluded, and why? By asking such questions as these a literature review then can be designed specifically to increase the power of a given argument, set of findings, recommendations and conclusions that have implications for action.

Broadly, then the process of reviewing the literature provides the opportunity to focus on a particular author's strategies of pin-pointing, inclusion and exclusion by allowing the voices and perspectives of a range of others to be included. It is a mapping exercise to include all voices of the *dramatis personae* of the historical debates that have taken place, including those that have been excluded in the agenda setting and the framing strategies of given authors. The literature review looks for a range of supporting arguments coming from this diverse range of voices, in order to set them alongside countervailing positions, again from a range of stances, and all of the positions in between. The aim of reviewing the Literature for critical points of view is to strengthen one's project proposal, one's discussion section, one's methodology section and one's argument and it is achieved by throwing the net wide to ensure a good catch and making use of the haul in some appropriate manner. By taking the multiplicity of critical points of view into consideration the review sets a given research project, dissertation, assignment and publication within an increasingly inclusive public space where we are all political actors making a case and formulating what is at stake.

From: Schostak, J. and Schostak, J. 2013.
Writing Research Conclusions Learning Routledge 03

Structuring the Review

A literature review is concept-centric. Thus, concepts determine the organizing framework of a review. In contrast, some authors take an author-centric approach and essentially present a summary of the relevant articles. This method fails to synthesize the literature. The two approaches are easily recognized, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Approaches to Literature Reviews	
Concept-centric	Author-centric
Concept X ... [author A, author B, ...]	Author A ... concept X, concept Y, ...
Concept Y ... [author A, author C, ...]	Author B ... concept X, concept W, ...

Table 2. Concept Matrix					
Articles	Concepts				
	A	B	C	D	...
1		✗	✗		✗
2	✗	✗			
...			✗	✗	

Table 3. Concept Matrix Augmented with Units of Analysis															
Articles	Concepts														
	A			B			C			D			...		
Unit of analysis	O	G	I	O	G	I	O	G	I	O	G	I	O	G	I
1					✗				✗						✗
2	✗				✗	✗		✗							
...								✗	✗			✗			

Legend: O (organizational), G (group), I (individual)

To make the transition from author- to concept-centric, we recommend that you compile a concept matrix as you read each article (Table 2), an idea we have adapted from Salipante et al. (1982). When your reading is complete, synthesize the literature by discussing each identified concept. Before commencing this step, take some time to develop a logical approach to grouping and presenting the key concepts you have uncovered.

You might need to add a further dimension to the concept matrix to handle the unit of analysis (Table 3). For example, Te'eni (2002) found that the concept "communication strategy" had different meanings when considered from the organizational, group, individual, and cognitive utterance levels. Isolating concepts by unit of analysis should result in a crisper review because it is easier to detect when you let a concept stray outside the scope of its domain.

Tone

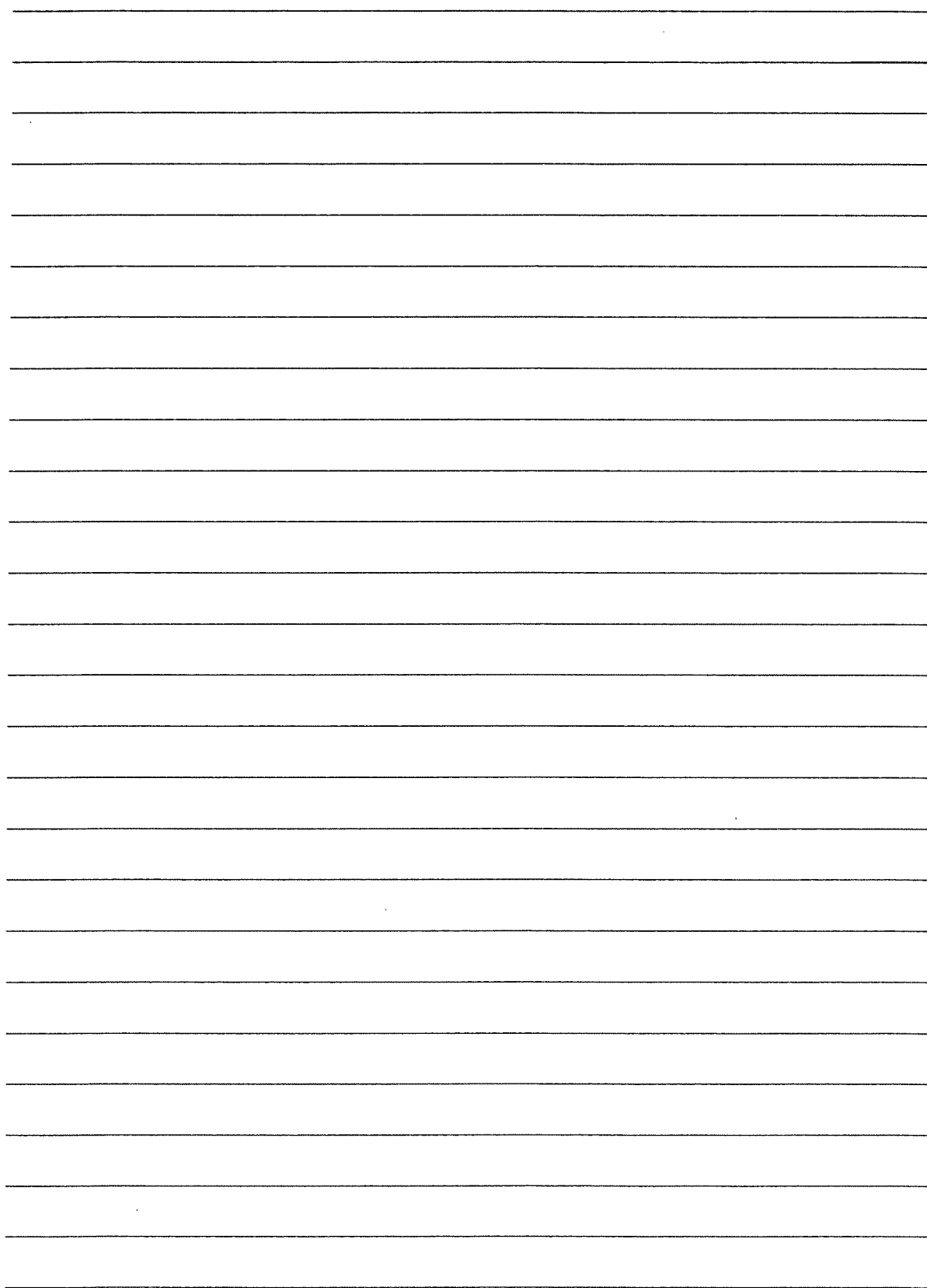
A successful literature review constructively informs the reader about what has been learned. In contrast to specific and critical reviews of individual papers, tell the reader what patterns you are seeing in the literature. Do not fall into the trap of being overly critical, as Daft (1985, p. 198) argued when describing why he rejected some journal submissions:

...another indicator of amateurism was an overly negative approach to the previous literature....Previous work is always vulnerable. Criticizing is easy, and of little value; it is more important to explain how research builds upon previous findings rather than to claim previous research is inadequate and incompetent.

Respect the work of those who labored to create the foundation for your current work by keeping in mind that all research is flawed (McGrath 1982). Of course, you cannot cite others' work blindly—sometimes research is poorly designed and conducted, and you will need to make hard decisions about whether to include this work in your review or to downplay its significance. Further, if a research stream has a common “error” that must be rectified in future research, you will need to point this out in order to move the field forward. In general, though, be fault tolerant. Recognize that knowledge is accumulated slowly in a piecemeal fashion and that we all make compromises in our research, even when writing a review article.

Tense

Opinion is varied on whether when writing about prior research you should mainly use the present or past tense. When either tense can communicate equally effectively, we opt for the present for several reasons. First, it gives the reader a greater sense of immediacy. Second, when discussing concepts, and in line with our concept-centric approach to literature reviews, it is logical to use the present tense because concepts are always here and now. Third, the present tense is terser and thus faster for the reader to process. There is an exception to this recommendation. An author's opinions can change with time. When attributing a statement or idea to a person, therefore, use the past tense: “Max Weber may no longer be saying what he once said” (Starbuck 1999).





Sample Literature Review Text

In 1984, Jenny Cushman, in her **perceptive** article, 'The Chinese community in Australian historiography' made a passionate plea for historians to move away from studies of Australian attitudes to "relocate the Chinese experience within the Chinese community itself". She further urged researchers to investigate the way Chinese customs, legal notions and kinship relations were adapted to the Australian physical and social environment. **It is tempting to credit** many of the succeeding changes to Cushman's appeal. However, the new approaches **must** be viewed within the context of the changing tide of historiography and the impact of 'multiculturalism'.

...

But to say this is to point to wider **implications** for history making in Australia. The Eurocentric histories of the past **cannot simply be** corrected by including the 'Chinese', especially if clear ethnic separations based on assumed single identities are maintained. **It is necessary** to go beyond Orientalist contrasts between us and them, Australian and Chinese, and to engage in a re-examination of sites of difference and dialogue. These sites will show the need to envisage multiple identities. They **may also sometimes point** to shared experiences of a shared world. Separate histories of ethnic peoples are not enough, especially if they serve to contain and exclude these peoples. Instead there is a need for a new synthesis in Australian history. The **crucial need for historians is to personally engage** with the contemporary politics of difference.*

Key

Attitude marker

Words or phrases that indicate a writer's assessment of or attitude to an issue.

Emphatic expressions

Words or phrases which relate to the strength of the claim or to your degree of confidence in what is said.

Hedging expression

Word or phrases which make statements about the degree of certainty, possibility or probability of a question.

Relational marker

Words or phrases that indicate, explicitly or implicitly, the writer's relationship to the audience or the scholarly community in which they are writing.

NB: Technically emphatic expressions, attitude markers and relational markers are also hedging expressions, but they are described here in terms of their primary function.

There are numerous resources at The Learning Centre and in the [UNSW library](#) that can help support you in the writing of your literature review. Please remember that there is no one way of writing a literature review and that it is essential that you discuss your chosen approach with your supervisor.

*Text source: Ryan, J. (1997). Chinese Australian history. In W. Hudson & G. Bolton (eds) *Creating Australia: Changing Australian history*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney.(pp. 75, 77)

References

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Sample Literature Review Text

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STRUCTURING THE LITERATURE REVIEW ACCORDING TO

THEMES



THEME 1 _____

Sub-theme (i) _____

Sub-theme (ii) _____

Sub-theme (iii) _____

Sub-theme (iv) _____

THEME 2 _____

Sub-theme (i) _____

Sub-theme (ii) _____

Sub-theme (iii) _____

Sub-theme (iv) _____

THEME 3 _____

Sub-theme (i) _____

Sub-theme (ii) _____

Sub-theme (iii) _____

Sub-theme (iv) _____

THEME 4 _____

Sub-theme (i) _____

Sub-theme (ii) _____

Sub-theme (iii) _____

Sub-theme (iv) _____