

THOUGHTS ON WRITING LITERATURE REVIEWS

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Literature reviews are essential to dissertations. They convey to the dissertation committee and other readers that the dissertation is grounded in and contributes to a body of ideas. In short, the literature review is a mark of the scholarship of the dissertation writer.

In producing a literature review, the student must attend to a number of considerations regarding, for example, the substantive boundaries of the literature under consideration and the way in which relevant ideas are presented. Below I reflect on these and other issues from the point-of-view of someone writing a dissertation in a professional school.

Question 1. What is the purpose of a literature review?

A literature review has two purposes. One is to set the context for the dissertation. By positioning the research question in the literature, the writer gives that question meaning, importance, and relevance. The other purpose is to demonstrate how the writer arrived at the research question, the theoretical approach, and the research methodology. In this sense, the literature review justifies the large choices made in designing the dissertation.

Question 2: What constitutes the literature?

For the purposes of writing dissertations, the literature consists of scholarly books and articles in academic journals (that is, writings that are peer-reviewed). In professional schools, the literature can also include research reports written by a variety of organizations and agencies. The focus is the print media. Newspaper articles and magazine articles are considered "derivative" and thus unlikely to be used unless they are particularly significant.

The literature must be bounded. First, and substantively, one should consider only that literature which is pertinent to the topic of the dissertation. For example, in writing on social capital and neighborhood development, only those writings that address this theme are eligible for inclusion. In addition, writings that elaborate on theoretical and methodological issues related to how you are conceptualizing and investigating the theme should also be considered. You are situating the theme in particular scholarly and planning and policy communities.

Second, the literature should be temporally bounded. Most intellectual and public issues have a history, sometimes a very long history as is the case with trade policy or industrial location. The planning or policy student will most likely be writing a

dissertation focused on a contemporary issue and thus must decide how far back in time to trace ideas. The decision of where to fix the "break" will depend on the importance of an historical analysis to the dissertation and on the existence of significant shifts in the issue being researched.

Third, the literature should be spatially bounded. This is often a relatively easy decision; many students are likely writing wholly and solely about the United States and thus will mainly consider the U.S. literature. A few students will be doing cross-national comparisons in which literatures from numerous countries have to be included. Nonetheless, ideas and practices travel and thus the student concerned only with U.S. policy might well have to address non-U.S. literature. For example, empowerment zones have their roots in ideas developed in England and architectural modernism drew from Germany, Brazil, and the United States.

Question 3. How much of the literature should be included?

On most policy and planning issues, the literature is quite vast and the writer is not going to include everything ever written on the topic, even after drawing the boundaries discussed above. Clearly, one should include the seminal writings; that is, those books, articles, and reports to which most people in the scholarly community refer. In addition, one has to distinguish between writings that add new ideas to the literature and those that are simply redundant. The redundant ones should be excluded, although they might be mentioned to give depth to the review.

Question 4. What should I write about?

The focus of a literature review should be the questions raised, answers proposed, and methods used in addressing the research theme or question. The review is not an intellectual history focusing on people, although certain people might be so important as to embody significant ideas. Neither is it primarily a discussion of significant books or articles. People and products should be subordinated to ideas.

Question 5. How should the literature review be organized?

The literature review should be theoretically and thus systematically organized; that is, it cannot be a random listing of ideas and research findings. The best way to organize the literature review is around ideas; but, what constitutes ideas? Usually a dissertation not only has a theme (for example, environmental degradation or poverty) but also an explanation. That explanation, in turn, includes something to be explained and factors which do the explaining, normally referred to as dependent and independent variables in social science research. Thus, one could organize the literature review around different explanations for a phenomenon. In the case of poverty, the student might divide the review into those writings that focus on class, those that focus on segregation, and those that focus on culture. Or, the student could discuss the literature in terms of ways to think about and measure the dependent variable (for example, definitions of poverty, poverty indicators) and ways to think about the different independent variables (for

example, lack of schooling, unemployment).

In addition, the student should consider various ways of organizing the literature that cut across the idea dimension. These could include organizing the literature chronologically, distinguishing (if this is relevant) between the scholarly and the policy literature, and discussing theoretical frameworks separately from methodological approaches. In addition, the topic might be illuminated by noting differences in ideological perspective and how men and women, peoples of dissimilar post-colonial status, or scholars and researchers of different races approach the topic.

Clearly, there are many possibilities here and the student has to experiment. Remember, the objective is to lead the reader to a belief in the credibility and utility of the choices that you have made. You want the reader to be convinced that your research question is important and that you have an appropriate research design. In your writing, then, you will synthesize the literature, re-constructing it in ways pertinent to your dissertation. Moreover, give the review a trajectory, forward momentum.

Question 6. How long should the literature review be?

A simple, but not very helpful answer to this question is "as long as it needs to be." A more helpful answer is that the review should be long enough to convey the key ideas, arguments, policies, and methodologies used in the literature. Even more helpful might be the following: A dissertation normally consists of chapters ranging from, say, 20 to 50 double-spaced pages. The literature review, then, should fall somewhere in that range. Usually, because it establishes the foundation for your dissertation, it is to the high end of that range.

Question 7. What about writing style?

The issue here is how you present the literature. Above I mentioned that you are engaging in synthesis. However, at times you will extract meaningful quotes and evidence or describe a single book's or article's argument or methodology in some depth. You should not simply summarize each piece of literature. Put the material "into your own words" and remember that detail is as important as integrative themes.

In addition, you should write critically. As you introduce various arguments and studies, assess their importance and quality as it pertains to your theme or question. Do not, however, use the literature review to diminish the efforts of others. Your primary goal should be to articulate what is useful in the literature.

Organizationally, a poor literature review is one that strings together synopses of writings or simply "points to" salient issues. If you find yourself with each paragraph being a different book or article, or person, then you are going astray. Moreover, do not simply mention ideas or research findings, discuss them. This failing occurs when the author of the review writes that Smith, Jones and Brown used the Gini coefficient, but does not indicate what Smith, Jones and Brown did with the measure, what they found, or

how they might have used it differently. A related example is when the author notes that Green found a strong relationship between non-profit organizational size and financial mismanagement but does not say precisely what that relationship was and how it was measured.

Otherwise, write clearly and concisely. Avoid rhetorical questions; write declaratively.

Question 8. Will I enjoy doing this?

Of course. Writing a literature review can be quite pleasurable, even if (or because it is) hard work. This is a great opportunity to solidify your understanding of issues and to build a foundation not just for the dissertation but for your future research.