

Literature Review Outline

I. Introduction

- a. Describe the overall topic that you have been investigating, why it is important to the field, and why you are interested in the topic.
- b. Identify themes and trends in research questions, methodology, and findings. Give a “big picture” of the literature.

II. Theme A¹

- a. Overview of characteristics of the theme (commonalities, differences, nuances)
- b. Sub-theme – narrow but grouped findings related to the theme
 - i. Study 1 (Research question(s), Methods/Participants, Related Findings)
 - ii. Study 2 (Research question(s), Methods/Participants, Related Findings)
 - iii. Study 3 (Research question(s), Methods/Participants, Related Findings)
- c. Sub-theme – narrow but grouped findings related to the theme
 - i. Study 4 (Research question(s), Methods/Participants, Related Findings)
 - ii. Study 5 (Research question(s), Methods/Participants, Related Findings)
 - iii. Study 6 (Research question(s), Methods/Participants, Related Findings)
- d. Etc., etc., etc. with other findings that fit Theme A; studies can be repeated if there are multiple findings that fit under more than one theme. However, no need to re-write methods/participants in detail (just enough to remind the reader about the study).

III. Theme B – follow a, b, c, and so on from above

IV. Keep repeating with themes

V. Conclusion: *An evaluation / critique of the existing literature. Write several paragraphs.*

- a. What are the contributions of this literature to the field?
- b. What are the overall strengths?
- c. What are the overall weaknesses?
- d. What might be missing?
- e. What are some next steps for research? The next steps should explicitly address how to “correct” for strengths, weaknesses, and gaps.

Example:

Review of the Literature on Girl Culture

Theme A: *Resistance*

Overview of resistance.

Sub-theme: *Resistance to teachers.*

Sub-theme: *Resistance as strategic.*

Sub-theme: *Resistance as subconscious.*

¹ Remember: The theme is a broad word or phrase that synthesizes a more narrow group of related findings. E.g., a theme of “Resistance” would include types of resistance, resistance to whom, resisting what, etc.



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Literature Review: Synthesizing Multiple Sources

The term **“synthesis”** means to combine separate elements to form a whole. Writing teachers often use this term when they assign students to write a literature review or other paper that requires the use of a variety of sources. When writing teachers use this term, they often hope that students will write papers that make a variety of connections among source material so that their papers are not organized source-by-source but are organized topic-by-topic to create a whole text. This handout is designed to help students better use synthesis in their writing and will offer strategies in the areas of:

- (1) pre-writing,
- (2) writing,
- (3) recognizing and
- (4) revising for synthesis.

1. Planning a Synthesis Paper

A common strategy for planning a synthesis paper is to create a “grid of common points.”

A grid of common points is a heuristic that allows a writer to group source material into specific categories. These categories can help the writer organize the paper.

To create a grid follow these steps (*note: be sure to see example grid on next page*):

1. As you read your source material, take note of words or ideas that repeat themselves.
2. As you read your source material, also make note of conflicts or contradictions in the information.
3. Based on the repetitions and contradictions you notice, write down the main research question that the source material answers. A good research question should be open-ended.
4. Make a list of the key ways the research answers the question. Make sure your answers account for both the contradictions and repetitions you discovered. Turn these answers into “categories.”
5. Create a grid using authors’ names and categories as organizing features.
6. Fill in the grid with details from source material.

1. Planning a Synthesis Paper (cont'd)

Sample Literature Review Grid of Common Points

Research Question: What role does capital punishment play in American society?

Possible Answers: Capital punishment plays the roles of deterrence, revenge, oppression, and political leverage.

Author's Names	Deterrence	Revenge	Oppression	Political Leverage
Author A				
Author B				
Author C				
Author D				
Author E				
Author F				

↑ *In the blank boxes above, the writer would write down what each author said about each category. Some boxes might be blank, but the more complete the writer can make the boxes, the more well developed the final paper will be.*

⇒ **TIP:** When creating your grid, avoid creating only two categories. Try to create categories that represent concerns that get repeated again and again in the source material.

2. Writing a Synthesis Paper

Once you have completed a grid of common points, you can begin writing your paper. When you begin to write the body of the paper, you may want to follow these steps:

1. Select one common point and divide it into sub-topics that represent paragraph size “chunks.”

For example, capital punishment literature on the issue of deterrence has the following sub-topics: (1) the public’s impression that capital punishment does deter crime, (2) researchers’ impressions that capital punishment does not deter crime in most cases, and (3) researchers’ impressions that capital punishment can lead to more crime.

2. For each “chunk” create a topic sentence that both (1) *synthesizes* the literature to be discussed and (2) *describes* the literature to be discussed. Here are some *example topic sentences*:

Much of the literature points out that while capital punishment does not deter crime, most Americans still believe that it does deter crime.

(The first highlighted section *synthesizes* the literature, the second highlighted section *describes* the literature).

Not only does the literature agree that capital punishment does not deter crime, some literature suggests that capital punishment may in fact cause more crime.

(The first two highlighted sections *synthesize* the literature and the third highlighted section *describes* the literature.)

3. Support the topic sentences you created in #2 with quotes and paraphrases from source material. As you incorporate source material, make sure to use clear transitions that relate the sources to each other and to your topic sentences.

(For more information about using and citing sources in text, see the Center’s handouts on MLA format, APA format, and integrating sources.)

3. *Recognizing Synthesis*

The following are two parts of a student's literature review. The first example is an early draft of the literature review. The second example is a revised version. Notice how the student's revision makes better use of synthesis at both the paragraph and sentence level. The revised example is also more accurate in its portrayal of the literature.

Unrevised Paragraph:

Much of the literature agrees that capital punishment is not a crime deterrent. According to Judy Pennington in an interview with Helen Prejean, crime rates in New Orleans went up in the eight weeks following executions. Jimmy Dunne notes that crime rates often go up in the first two or three months following an execution. "Death and the American" argues that America's crime rate as a whole has increased drastically since the re-instatement of the death penalty in the 1960s. This article notes that 700 crimes are committed for every 100,000 Americans. Helen Prejean cites Ellis in her book to note that in 1980 500,000 people were behind bars and in 1990 that figure rose to 1.1 million.

Revised Paragraph(s):

The literature on capital punishment suggests that it fails as a deterrent in two key ways. First, much of the literature suggests that capital punishment does not lower the crime rate. Helen Prejean, in *Deadman Walking*, clearly notes that capital punishment does little to lower the crime rate. Prejean argues that the "evidence that executions do not deter crime is conclusive [...] the U.S. murder rate is no higher in states that do not have the death penalty than those who do" (110). Prejean's point is reiterated from a historical perspective in "Death and the American." Here, the author notes that despite the social and economic upheavals that occurred from the 1930s to the 1960s, the crime rate barely changed (2). However, after the reinstatement of the death penalty in the 1960s, the author notes that "crime rates soared" (2). Steven Hawkins points out that law enforcement officials also agree that the death penalty has failed to stop crime. He explains that a 1995 Peter D. Hart Research Associates survey found that police chiefs believe the death penalty to be "the least effective way of reducing crime" (1).

Some of the literature suggests that, in addition to failing to lower the crime rate, capital punishment can lead to more crime. In an interview with Helen Prejean, Judy Pennington notes that in 1987, the crime rate in New Orleans went up 16.3 percent in the quarter following eight executions (7). In *Deadman Walking*, Prejean elaborates on her position that capital punishment can be related to an increase in crime. She notes that in Canada in 1975, the murder rate peaked "one year before the death penalty was abolished" (110). Capital punishment opponents like Thurgood Marshall and Donald Cabana agree with Prejean that capital punishment has failed as a deterrent and cite similar statistical studies as evidence for this position (Fitzpatrick 3; Hawkins 1). Fitzpatrick also explains that Marshall would remind "us that the question with respect to deterrence is not whether the death penalty is a deterrent but whether it is a better deterrent than life in imprisonment" (53). The literature reviewed seems to overwhelmingly suggest that capital punishment is not the better deterrent.

4. Revising a Synthesis Paper

4A. Improving Synthesis at the Paper Level

1. Write down the paper's thesis or main research question.
2. Highlight the synthesizing topic sentence of each paragraph.
3. If a topic sentence is missing, draw a star (*) next to the paragraph.
4. Using pages 3 & 4 as guides, write topic sentences for every star.
5. If necessary, re-organize and combine source material to fit with new topic sentences.

4B. Improving Synthesis at the Paragraph Level

1. Select a paragraph to work with.
2. Highlight the topic sentence.
3. In every sentence highlight words that link the topic sentence and source material.
4. If links are missing, draw a slash (/) in front of the sentence.
5. Where slashes appear, add transitions.

Handout created by T.B. Henning—Updated February 2011

Sources Consulted include:

Corn, Kevin, et al. *Research and Argumentation*. 2nd ed. IUPUI: HarperCollins, 1994. Print.

“Death and the American.” *The Economist* 21 June 1997: 1-2. Web. 1 Aug. 1997.

Fitzpatrick, Tracy B. “Justice Thurgood Marshall and Capital Punishment.” *American Criminal Law Review* 32.4 (1995): 1-17. Web. 1 Aug. 1997.

Hawkins, Steven. “Death at Midnight...Hope at Sunrise.” *Corrections Today* Aug. 1996: 1-2. Web. 1 Aug. 1997.

Pennington, Judy. “Helen Prejean.” *The Progressive* Jan. 1996: 1-9. Web. 1 Aug. 1997.

Prejean, Helen. *Deadman Walking*. New York: Random House, 1992. Print.

Getting Started: Assessing Sources/Creating a Matrix/Writing a Literature Review

If you're new to academic research and are writing an argumentative paper for the first time, you will need to first spend time organizing, assessing, and “unpacking” your sources. Once you can see clearly what kinds of voices and perspectives address your research questions, you can enter into the conversation by addressing counter-arguments as well as articulating and supporting your own arguments.

Getting the basic steps down now will help as you move on to upper level classes in your major.

The basics:

To achieve the kind of familiarity with sources required for incorporating them into your own arguments and demonstrating your knowledge, you will need to know: **a)** how to assess the sources, **b)** create a matrix, **3)** what's expected when writing a literature review.

ASSESSING SOURCES

Begin the process of evaluating the sources you are finding by first reading the text and summarizing the author's main points by making notes, written or mental, annotations, or other means. In academic writing, you also need to be fully informed about the sources that look relevant to your research: for example, who is the writer and what are his/her credentials, what is the purpose of and audience for the publication and how does a particular source fit into the larger, ongoing conversation about this question. In other words, look at the factors external to the source in order to help you determine its credibility and authority. Answer the following sets of questions for each of your sources:

Author

Conduct a brief search on the author to determine his/her expertise, reputation, and credibility.

Look at citations, articles, and books by this author to find information about who the author is, what his/her credentials are, and what occupation or position s/he holds.

Publication and Audience

1. Examine the publication for which the author is writing to determine the author's intended audience, and the publication's reputation, credibility, and target reader/researcher.
2. Look in the text for clues to what audience the author is addressing, e.g., specialized or general vocabulary, types of sources cited, explicit references to the audience.

3. Look at the publication itself: front/back cover, submission guidelines, editorial board, etc., for an indication of audience and types of articles. Once you're satisfied that your source is credible and reliable, you are ready to analyze the text itself.

Argument/Evidence

1. Carefully read the text, looking at the evidence the author is using and the structure of the argument (e.g., whether it moves logically from point to point).
2. Identify the range of evidence (personal opinions or observations, research, case studies, analogies, statistics, facts, quotations, etc.).
3. Assess how the author presents and discusses alternative perspectives in relation to his/her thesis?
4. Locate any gaps or inconsistencies in the development of the argument.

Relevance/Consistency

1. Analyze the text in relation to your question and developing thesis, and in relation to other sources you've been reading.
2. If it supports your thinking, identify the assumptions/biases/perspectives influencing the writer, and how they compare to your own and those of other writers with whom this one agrees.
3. If it is an opposing perspective, identify the assumptions/biases/perspectives influencing the writer, and how they compare to your own and those of other writers with whom this one agrees?
4. Determine how this source contributes to your understanding or to generating new questions in your thinking?

CREATING A MATRIX

From your initial forays into the sources, you should have some sense of the range of ways authors answer your question and that there are, in fact, several reasonable and defensible answers to your question. It is important to begin understanding what influences different writers to answer your question differently. You will want to start identifying the perspectives, schools of thought, sets of variables, etc., that influence the question you're trying to answer. You will also want to organize your readings into categories that will help you choose the main arguments in support of and in opposition to your thesis.

WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW

Bearing in mind that a viable research question produces more than one reasonable answer, the literature review:

- Describes the kind of search that was conducted
- Summarizes, analyzes, and organizes the various responses found in the scholarly conversation regarding the question

- Explains why different scholars provide different answers for the same or related questions (i.e. accounts for the debate/tension in the literature)

As a result, the literature review does more than report the conclusions of researchers; it accounts for HOW those conclusions are reached.

The literature review plays an important role in research projects because:

- It locates our research question within the scholarly debate relevant to our concerns
- We don't need to reinvent the wheel, so we need to discover what has been done and represent it
- We let the reader see the history of the question and demonstrate that we have done our homework
- We identify what has not been done, or what has not been done well

Use the following steps in writing your literature review:

1. Organize your sources by detecting a pattern that helps you explain why one group of sources comes up with one answer and another group comes up with another answer. Creating a matrix is a very effective way of doing this.
2. Summarize these different groups of sources in terms of how they address the question: what methodology, evidence, critical concepts, etc. do they employ?
3. Analyze the content of these sources in terms of the answer they provide to your central question or in terms of the question they raise (which may be slightly different from your question). Show how they offer important insights. Show how they neglect particular areas.

This document is based on "Integrating Writing: Assessing Sources/Writing a Literature Review," (<http://www.bothell.washington.edu/writingcenter/writing/reviews>).

Writing A Literature Review and Using a Synthesis Matrix

My professor says I have to write a literature review, what do I do?

Well, to begin, you have to know that when writing a literature review, the goal of the researcher is to determine the current state of knowledge about a particular topic by asking, “What do we know or not know about this issue?” In conducting this type of research, it is imperative to examine several different sources to determine where the knowledge overlaps and where it falls short. A literature review requires a **synthesis** of different subtopics to come to a greater understanding of the state of knowledge on a larger issue. It works very much like a jigsaw puzzle. The individual pieces (arguments) must be put together in order to reveal the whole (state of knowledge).

So basically I just read the articles and summarize each one separately?

No, a literature review is not a summary. Rather than merely presenting a summary of each source, a literature review should be organized according to each subtopic discussed about the larger topic. For example, one section of a literature review might read “Researcher A suggests that X is true. Researcher B also argues that X is true, but points out that the effects of X may be different from those suggested by Researcher A.” It is clear that subtopic X is the main idea covered in these sentences. Researchers A and B agree that X is true, but they disagree on X’s effects. There is both agreement and disagreement, but what links the two arguments is the fact that they both concern X.

This sounds like a lot of information, how can I keep it organized?

Because a literature review is **NOT** a summary of these different sources, it can be very difficult to keep your research organized. It is especially difficult to organize the information in a way that makes the writing process simpler. One way that seems particularly helpful in organizing literature reviews is the **synthesis matrix**. The synthesis matrix is a chart that allows a researcher to sort and categorize the different arguments presented on an issue. Across the top of the chart are the spaces to record sources, and along the side of the chart are the spaces to record the main points of argument on the topic at hand. As you examine your first source, you will work vertically in the column belonging to that source, recording as much information as possible about each significant idea presented in the work. Follow a similar pattern for your following sources. As you find information that relates to your already identified main points, put it in the pertaining row. In your new sources, you will also probably find new main ideas that you need to add to your list at the left. You now have a completed matrix!

As you write your review, you will work horizontally in the row belonging to each point discussed. As you combine the information presented in each row, you will begin to see each section of your paper taking shape. Remember, some of the sources may not cover all of the main ideas listed on the left, but that can be useful also. The gaps on your chart could provide clues about the gaps in the current state of knowledge on your topic.

CREATING YOUR SYNTHESIS MATRIX

It is probably best to begin your chart by labeling the columns both horizontally and vertically. The sample chart below illustrates how to do this.

Topic: _____

	Source #1	Source #2	Source #3	Source #4
Main Idea A				
Main Idea B				

Label the columns across the top of your chart with the author's last name or with a few keywords from the title of the work. Then label the sides of the chart with the main ideas that your sources discuss about your topic. As you read each source, make notes in the appropriate column about the information discussed in the work, as shown in the following chart.

Topic: Women in WWII

	Cornelsen	Stewart	Bruley	Scott
Alteration of women's roles because of WWII	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Women accredited the WASP program for opening new doors, challenging stereotypes, and proving that women were as capable as men (p. 113) - Women could compete with men as equals in the sky because of their exemplary performance (p. 116) - WASP created opportunities for women that had never previously existed (p. 112) - Women's success at flying aircrafts "marked a pivotal step towards breaking the existing gender barrier" (p. 112) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - WAAC (Women's Army Auxiliary Corp) was 1st chance for women to serve in army, given full army status in 1943 as WAC (p. 28) - Needs of the war were so great that women's traditional social roles were ignored (p. 30) - Military women paid well for the time period and given benefits if they became pregnant (p. 32) - The 1940's brought more opportunities to women than ever before (p. 26) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Women given equal opportunities (p. 223) - Women joined workforce as a break from the ordinary to help the war (p. 220) - Unconscious decision to cross into male-dominated roles (p. 221) - Seized these new opportunities to bring about change (p. 230) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Women born in the 1920's found new doors open to them where they once would have encountered brick walls (p. 526) - Even women not directly involved in the war were changing mentally by being challenged to expand their horizons because of the changing world around them (p. 562) - War also brought intellectual expansion to many people (p. 557)
Hardships and oppositions women faced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "From the outset male pilots resented women's presence in a traditionally male military setting" (p. 1113-4) - "The WASP were routinely assigned inferior planes that were later found to have been improperly maintained" (p. 114) - discrimination against WASP at every level of military service, women were only paid 2/3 of what men were for doing identical tasks (p. 114) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Women in the military given extensive physical and mental tests, but still discriminated against, ridiculed, and considered inferior to men (p. 29) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Women given unskilled labor positions by government because only seen as temporary workers, therefore no reason to train them (p. 221-2) - Women given less significant work and viewed as less intelligent and physically able (p. 224) - "The Church-Bliss diary reveals how dilution arrangements...ensured that women working in male preserves were prevented 	

	Cornelsen	Stewart	Bruley	Scott
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “In the belief that women were emotionally and physically fragile, the military questioned women’s capabilities to fly an aircraft” (p. 114-5), regardless of their training or aptitude - WASP’s not granted veteran status until 1979 (p. 115) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> from achieving any sort of equality” (p. 230) - more traditionally male jobs resisted the integration of women workers, while other industries were less resistant... but in most all cases women were considered temporary workers (p. 221) - Equal pay rarely given to women, even though women did the same work (p. 221) - Women occasionally found their way to positions of importance, but were always treated as inferior (p. 226-8) - After the war, women were the first to be let go because of their temporary status (p. 230) - Women in the workforce also faced discrimination from labor unions (p. 226) 	
Opposition: WWII did NOT effect women		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Women put in untraditional roles during/because of the war, but back to previous subservient roles after the war (p. 35) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Women were not affected because they still remained in subordinate positions after the war (p. 217) 	

After your chart is complete, notice patterns of information. You may find that your sources, at times, discuss very similar material, or that they sometimes deal with completely different aspects of your topic. These patterns can be useful in creating a thesis statement that can guide your writing and keep you focused as you begin your draft.

WRITING YOUR REVIEW

Here is an example from the literature review: “World War Two and its Effect on Women.” This excerpt synthesizes information without summarizing.

While the articles used in this research agree that women made many advances during the Word War II period, it is crucial to realize that not all these changes were welcomed. In most cases women faced discrimination from just about everyone around them. Women in the workplace were often placed in positions of inferiority or treated as being less physically able to do the same work the men did. Many women were often not trained because they were viewed as temporary employees who were only there for the duration of the war (Bruley, 2003, pp.221-222). Women were very rarely given equal pay as men, even though some of them did the same work. Women in the military faced not only mental abuse but also physical harm from their male counterparts. According to Cornelsen (2005), there were many instances where female aviators were injured or killed due to being made to fly ill-maintained aircrafts or aircrafts that had been sabotaged. (p.114)

The sample above is an excellent example of how to synthesize information adequately. Notice how when transitioning from Bruley to Cornelsen the writer notes not only that the two articles are similar, but also *how* they are similar. The writer goes into detail about Bruley’s discussion of women in industry facing discrimination while noting that Stewart deals with prejudice in the military. The author also transitions well between the Bruley article and the Cornelsen article; rather than summarizing, the author draws comparisons between the two articles, giving relevant information and at the same time synthesizing the two works.