

# LITERATURE REVIEW TIPS

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## PURPOSE OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW/MEDIAGRAPHY

Whether you aspire to complete a research paper or thesis, a research-based production project, or even a grant proposal for a creative work, it's important that you be able to demonstrate your **familiarity with existing work in the field**. The literature review is one common means of demonstrating this familiarity. According to educational psychologist John Creswell, author of numerous research design texts, the literature review does several things: (1) "It shares with the reader the results of other studies that are closely related to the study being reported"; (2) "It relates a study to the larger ongoing dialogue in the literature about a topic, filling in gaps and extending prior studies"; and (3) "It provides a framework for establishing the importance of [your] study as well as a benchmark for comparing the results of a study with other findings" (Creswell 29-30).



If you've been keeping thorough abstracts of the works you read/watch/listen to/experience/etc. *as you encounter them* (rather than waiting until your desk is piled with books and articles, and you have to backtrack; rather than relying on your memory to recall an exhibition you visited or conference you attended), your eventual work in compiling this review will be greatly simplified. There are several online resources – some of which are listed at the end of this document – that encourage you to ask particular questions of each text you plan to address in your literature review; their recommended lists of questions parallel very closely the list of six questions we applied in our abstracting exercise. Boston College University Libraries (2008), for instance, suggest that for each text you review, you consider: “the methodology employed; the quality of the findings or conclusions; the document’s major strengths and weaknesses”; the author’s “ideological stance”; the generalizability of the results; etc. The University of California, Santa Cruz’s (2005) libraries advocate that consideration be given to the following criteria:

- *Provenance*: What are the author’s credentials? Are the author’s arguments supported by evidence? (Consider also the resource’s *currency*. Is it outmoded? Even if it’s a “classic,” does it offer lessons that are applicable to the contemporary context?)
- *Objectivity*: “Is the author’s perspective even-handed or prejudicial? Is contrary data considered or is certain pertinent information ignored to prove the author’s point?”
- *Persuasiveness*: Which of the author’s theses are most/least convincing?
- *Value*: Are the author’s arguments and conclusions convincing? Does the work ultimately contribute in any significant way to an understanding of the subject?

You’ll see that these questions prompt you not only to recapitulate the author’s arguments, but also to critically engage with each work’s arguments, methodologies, utility, etc. Hopefully, you can find

many parallels between these recommendations and our own list of abstracting questions. And, hopefully, you'll find that getting into the practice of abstracting your sources, by applying these questions, will help you eventually to take a *selectively comprehensive* (yes, that may seem like an oxymoron; what I hope to convey is the importance of delimiting the area you're researching, and digging deep within that well-defined area) and *critical* view of the work in your field. Grey and Malins (2004), who write about creating "contextual reviews" for art-based creative projects, say that one must strike a balance between breadth and depth; "Initially it is very important to cast the net of contextual enquiry very wide and develop an overview and understanding of the field. This is the mapping stage and can help in deciding what comes within the scope of the research and...what lies outside" (p. 37).

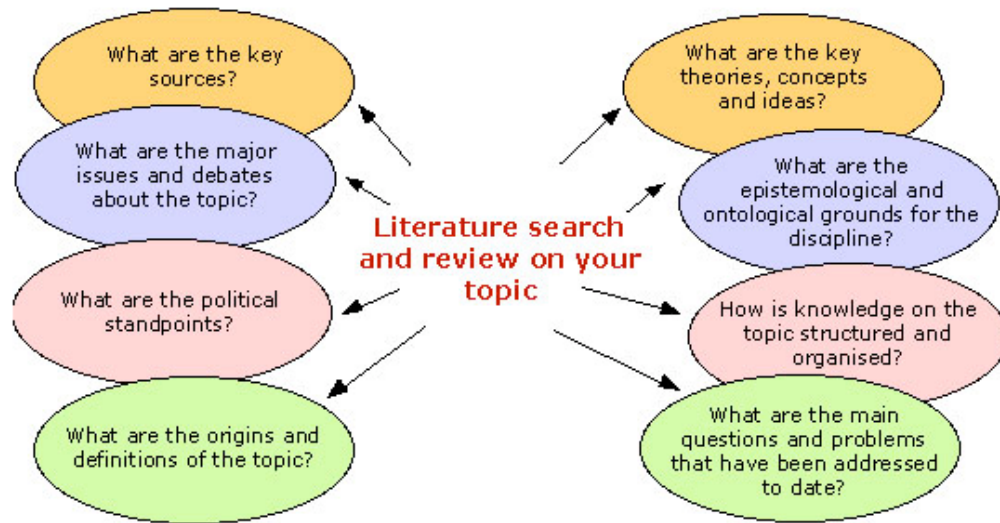
Dena Taylor and Margaret Procter (2008), of the University of Toronto, argue that a literature review serves two primary purposes: it allows you to demonstrate your "**information seeking**" **ability** (although some might take issue with the superficial connotations of the term "information") – your efficiency in reviewing a wide body of work, and your discernment in selecting the most useful sources<sup>1</sup> – and it allows you to demonstrate your "**critical appraisal**." Daniel Chandler (2004) reminds us that the term "critical" does not necessarily imply that "you should focus on criticizing the work of established researchers. It is primarily meant to indicate that: the review should not be merely a *descriptive* list...[and that] you are capable of thinking critically and with insight of issues raised by previous research." As Grey and Malins explain, the view "allows you to acknowledge...different contributions, but also encourages you to state your responses to them – both positive and negative" (p. 37).

USCS's libraries propose a different way of looking at the review's functions; a literature review's purpose is to:

- Place each work in the context of its contribution to the understanding of the subject under review
- Describe the relationship of each work to the others under consideration
- Identify new ways to interpret, and shed light on any gaps in, previous research
- Resolve conflicts amongst seemingly contradictory previous studies
- Identify areas of prior scholarship to prevent duplication of effort
- Point the way forward for future research
- Place one's original work...in the context of existing literature

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<sup>1</sup> How do you decide which sources are worth mentioning? You should certainly acknowledge those texts that have achieved "canonical" status and those that are frequently cited by other sources in your field. If there are several similar studies on a topic, Chandler suggests that you "review a representative study which (sic) was well designed."



<<University of New South Wales Learning Center, 2007:  
[http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/ref\\_elec3.html](http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/ref_elec3.html)>>

The literature review is not simply a laundry list of research projects: X said this, then Y said this, then Z said this.... It is not an opportunity for you to show your reader just *how much* research you've done by including *everything* you've learned. Barzun and Graff acknowledge that such a comprehensive review wouldn't be terribly useful:

[I]t is not possible to write a report direct from the sum total of the gathered materials. You can compose only from what you deliberately select from your notes, which bulk much larger than your report will when done. It is obvious that this collection of notes can very soon become unmanageable. You must therefore adopt some system for creating order as you go, so that you may select intelligently later on (p. 23).

The literature review thus is not simply a *review* -- a rehashing -- as its name might imply; it has a logical organization and effectively presents an argument: an argument for *your* work. "It's usually a bad sign to see every paragraph beginning with the name of a researcher," Taylor and Procter write. In the literature review, you identify patterns in existing research and draw conclusions. You identify the "holes," the omissions in the literature or mediagraphy or shortcomings in previous research or production, that your work promises to fill.

## MAPPING YOUR SOURCES AND STRUCTURING YOUR REVIEW

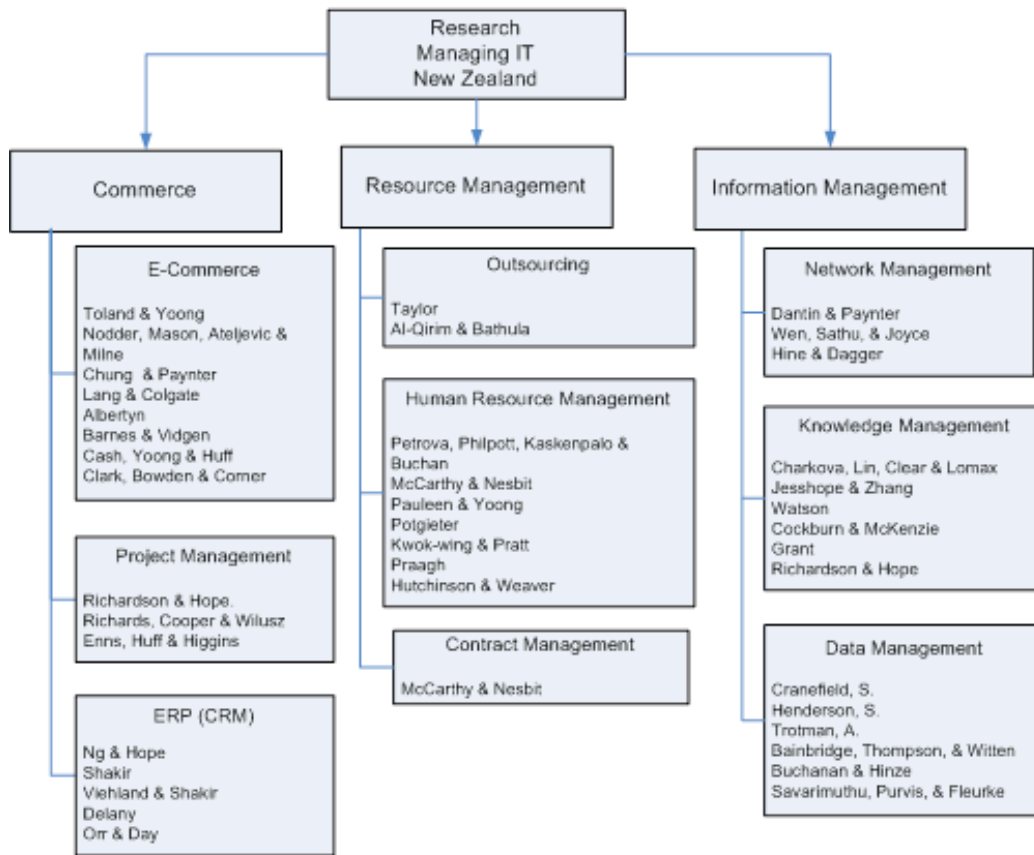
*Even after we mark the page, there are blanks beyond the borders of what we create, and blanks within what we create. Maps are defined by what they include but are often more revealing in what they exclude (Turchi, 2004, p. 29).*

*In searching for information, be prepared to be simultaneously **depressed and excited** – depressed because you cannot find anything to match your needs exactly, and excited because this means that your line of inquiry could be unusual or even unique. Be prepared to step out of both your subject area...and even your discipline (Grey and Malins, 2004, p. 43).*

Fiction writer Peter Turchi helps us to look differently at these "holes" in the map of your terrain, the omissions in the literature, the gaps in the evolution of your practice. There are many ways to interpret these holes -- so we must be careful to not immediately assume that our job is to fill them. "Blanks can represent what is known, deemed unimportant in a particular context, for a particular map" (p. 33). Blanks "might also be an indication of insufficient curiosity, or evidence of intense self-interest" (p. 34). You might be the first to deem a subject worthy of investigation; you should ask yourself why that's the case. "Ignorance is another sort of blank" (p. 34); it could be that nobody's studied a particular issue before because the phenomenon you're proposing to study is relatively new -- or because the existing data and research instruments were insufficient. Or, maybe you simply haven't done enough research yet -- and what currently appears to be an understudied area actually has a rich history of research; Malins and Grey note that it is common in literature reviews to state "that there is a 'lack of research' without providing sufficient evidence to justify that statement" (p. 43).

A blank on a map might also be "a symbol of rigorous standards; the presence of absences [can lead] authority to all on the map that [is] unblank" (p. 37). If we're looking at a Google map of high-resolution satellite images and we find a grey blank right in the middle, this acknowledgment of uncertainty can lend credibility to all the clarity around it. Blanks can be opportunities: "a fuller understanding of what we don't know is itself new knowledge, and redefines what we know. Omissions, intended or unintended, provoke the imagination" (p. 47). You work in the blanks.

These blanks needn't be merely metaphorical; you can visualize them. Before you begin writing the review, Creswell (2003) promotes the creation of a "**literature map**": "a visual summary of the research that has been conducted by others" in your area of research (p. 39).



This visual representation can take many forms: "One is a hierarchical structure, with a top-down presentation of the literature ending at the bottom with a proposed study that will extend the literature." You could map your sources chronologically, as the development of an idea, with your intervention positioned as the next step in that idea's evolution. "Another [model] might be similar to a flowchart in which the reader understands the literature unfolding from left to right, with the studies furthest to the right advancing a proposed study that adds to the literature"; this format isn't necessarily *organized chronologically*, but it does perhaps narrow progressively in thematic focus, so that, at the end, it effectively makes the case for the work you propose to do (p. 39). "A third model might be composed of circles" – as in a Venn diagram – "with each circle representing a body of literature and the intersection of the circles indicating the place at which future research is needed" (p. 39). The most common means of structuring a literature review are **thematic, chronological, or methodological** – but different projects might call for different formats. Perhaps you can try out various ways of structuring your "literature map" to see which seems most consistent with the way you plan to structure your research.<sup>2</sup> Eventually, you should decide upon one scheme that will inform your *verbal* map of the literature in your literature review.

<sup>2</sup> Grey and Malins propose that "in order to get the most comprehensive understanding out of the material, you may want to map the references in different ways in relation to different criteria, for example chronology, using a 'timeline' to map key references in relation to various developments over time; thematic issues, using a mind map to see the relationships between things; comparing and contrasting references...using a table or a matrix structure.... By playing with the references –

Grey and Malins echo Cresswell's advice:

[S]ome references may be organized chronologically in parts of your review where you may be evaluating developments over time; some may be arranged thematically, demonstrating similarities and allowing you to make creative connections (cross-currents) between previously unrelated research; and some arranged to demonstrate **comparison and contrast** perhaps using a common set of criteria as an "anchor" (p. 49).

The structure you ultimately choose, Taylor and Procter say, should serve several functions: the review's organization should parallel the structure of the work you plan to conduct (e.g., why review the literature chronologically if your work will not have a historical dimension?); it should synthesize what is known and not known, what has been done and has not been done, within your delimited area of work; it should identify controversies in the field and acknowledge even work that *you* might find unconvincing or problematic, but which has proven influential; and it should identify areas where we need further work. I would add another key function: if you are using your literature review to consider appropriate **theoretical frameworks, central concepts, or methodologies** – academic or applied or artistic – for your project, you should also acknowledge existing work that has laid the *theoretical or methodological foundations* for your work.

When writing, please keep in mind Boston College University Libraries' list of caveats:

<http://libguides.bc.edu/content.php?pid=1194&sid=86147>. Use direct quotations sparingly.

Subheads are a good idea; they help to identify what you regard as the key themes in your proposed project and track their logical unfolding. Be sure to provide effective transitions between each section, where you preview and summarize the material and explain how each section connects to the next; and at the end of the review, explain again how the themes or topics explored in each of your sections are linked together in your proposed project.

You can find sample literature reviews in the introductions or first chapters of many dissertations and books. Many academic articles contain abbreviated literature reviews in their first or second subheaded sections. And there are many examples online; see the following:

- <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/667/01/>
- <http://gsteinbe.intrasun.tcnj.edu/tcnj/rhetoric2/litreviews.htm>
- <http://www.cgu.edu/pages/931.asp>

Finally, remember, as you write your literature review for Understanding Media Studies, that writing a literature review – as with any craft, as Sennett would say – requires time and patience. A graduate-level research project or research-based production or creative project requires extended review of the work in your specific research area, and in the broader field of media studies. You won't have time this semester to write a definitive review; instead, you should consider the review you conduct this semester, for UMS, a "**living document**" – a first-draft attempt to find patterns, identify major debates, assess methodologies, and plot potential openings for *your* eventual contribution. Then, over the next several semesters, your coursework and outside-of-class readings and viewings and listenings should all make their way into your "resource bank" – and, ideally, into your research

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organizing them in different ways – you could end up with several maps to help you decide how to structure your review" (p. 52-3).

journal. If, ultimately, you choose to complete a cumulative project – a thesis, or an independent study or production – in Media Studies, you can draw on this bank to revise and expand the literature review you developed in UMS. Grey and Malins agree that it is important to “keep updating the information with new references as the field around you develops,” and as you discover more. “As your work progresses the map might expand, shrink, or change shape as relevant new references are identified and reviewed, and some earlier references become less important” (p. 36).

For the purposes of this assignment – a work-in-progress – you’re expected to review **no fewer than 15 sources**, in a variety of media (academic journals, scholarly books, popular periodicals, archival resources, multimedia resources, etc.)<sup>3</sup>. Then, distill their foci, methodologies, conclusions, strengths and weaknesses, etc., in an **eight- to ten-page double-spaced literature review**. Focus on finding patterns and drawing conclusions – but don’t hesitate to acknowledge when those conclusions are, for now, only tentative; and when their confirmation depends upon your accessing additional sources or bodies of literature. If there are areas where you know you’ll need to do more work, point out those areas, and explain your next steps. Identify what, at this early stage of your research, *appear* to be the “blanks,” the omissions in the literature or shortcomings in existing work, that you intend for your work to fill.

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<sup>3</sup> Recall this passage from the “Plotting Your Course” guide, which you read for our second class: *Although some critics regard the popular press as inappropriate sources for scholarly work -- and out of place in any scholarly literature review -- I disagree. Yes, it is important to know how to [distinguish between scholarly and popular resources](#) -- if only to make distinctions of credibility -- but there is no reason that a Vogue article or an episode of The View could not suggest a possible case study for your research. Furthermore, if you're researching on the bleeding edge -- on a topic on which no scholarly literature is yet available -- there is no reason why an New York Times or an [Esopus](#) article shouldn't be included in your resource list -- as long as you've got plenty of scholarly sources (on methodology or theoretical framework, for example) to fill out the balance of your list.*

So, in short, it's fine to include popular sources on your *topic* -- especially if your topic is drawn from popular culture -- but you wouldn't rely on a magazine article to, say, propose a methodology for your study, or to provide info on the "current state of the scholarly field." Peer-reviewed books and journals are still the gold standard -- and they should make up the bulk of your review. But respectable popular sources can help to provide factual info, help you set the cultural context for your topic, etc.

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See also Chris Hart, *Doing a Literature Review: Releasing the Social Science Research Imagination* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998)