

# MERRIMACK COLLEGE WRITING CENTER

## WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW

Many disciplines, especially in the social and natural sciences, business, and education, require a literature review in order to show that the researcher has command of the intellectual conversation, and that the study or experiment is grounded in disciplinary knowledge. This review may be a paper itself, or part of a paper.

### What It Is, What It Isn't

The literature review is a *set of arguments* that you create, showing what *has* and *hasn't* been examined in the field or subject you are studying. It *will* include sources on the subject, and *may* include tangential sources that help delineate both the positive space (what has been said) and the negative space (what is missing).

For example, my research on the *R.M.S. Titanic* sinking may lead me to examine not only old records of the sinking, eyewitness testimony, blueprints, schematics, and budgets directly tied to the ship, but it may also lead me to study cultural behaviors in Irish shipyards, raw materials shipments, the history of iron, the lifecycle of icebergs, and the entire liner and shipping industry in 1912, *synthesizing* all this information into my arguments.

The literature review is *not* the following:

- A summary of individual sources
- A glorified book report
- A collection of sources that lacks a unifying argument.

In other words, the review of literature is a *tool* for *establishing* your credibility with your audience, for *grounding* your arguments in reason and evidence, and for *leading* your audience into and out of your part of the intellectual conversation.

### Preparation

You cannot write a literature review without good command of the literature, so go read. Some tips:

Work with a research librarian to search a variety of keywords. This usually yields the best results with the widest range.

Read strategically. *Use* the Table of Contents to understand argument structure in a book, or headings to understand argument structure in an article. *Develop* questions that your reading will attempt to answer. *Read* introductions and conclusions to get the overall purpose, argument (thesis) and findings of an article. *Use* the index to identify pages or chapters most significant to your arguments, whether for or against, and read them.

Document a source right away, whether you end up using it or not, so that you can easily find it later and so that putting together your Works Cited, References, or Bibliography will be easier.

Take notes (including page numbers) on the page where you've written the documentation.

Note commonalities in the margins when you read something that someone else has agreed or disagreed with. These sources will likely end up close together in your review.

Basically, this is the process for creating a detailed annotated bibliography, which is a good first step to begin synthesis.

### When You Write

Synthesize the research, i.e. weave it together into a new understanding of the subject. As a rule, *never* use only one source in a paragraph, *unless* you are examining that source in detail, quoting and analyzing the source in depth.

Attend to development. Academic paragraphs all have three parts: 1) claim or topic sentence, 2) evidence, and 3) discussion or metacommentary. Items one and three are in your own words. The evidence in a review of literature will come from the sources, whether summarized, synthesized, paraphrased, or quoted.

Organize your arguments using rhetorical patterns, especially compare & contrast, cause & effect, and problem & solution.

