**Entering a Scholarly Conversation through a Literature Review**

**By Lydia McDermott**

Kenneth Burke compares academic discourse to entering a conversation in a parlor:

*Imagine you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is all about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that have gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponents, depending on the quality of your ally’s assistance. However the discussion is* ***interminable****. The hour grows late; you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.* (McMillen and Hill 6)

The literature review may best capture this discourse process. Whether you are writing a short literature review for an article or report, or a literature review as a chapter of a thesis, you are establishing the conversation that you hope to enter in the body of your article, report, or thesis. Your literature review shows readers that you have spent enough time in the parlor to contribute to the conversation. The *process* of conducting the literature review, however, is about your own development as a scholar in the parlor. Through the reading, summarizing, and reviewing of the relevant literature to your research question, you learn how to frame your own research. You may identify new ways to interpret gaps in previous research. You will hone your own theoretical framework while also interpreting the major issues surrounding your own research.

Conducting the research for the literature review is your careful listening in the parlor. Your first drafts of the literature review may be a lot like when you repeat back something someone has said in your own words to make sure you understand it. It is tentative. But, as you refine it, your literature review will open the way to the new contribution you have to the conversation by contextualizing it.

***Listening In: Research***

Steps toward writing a lit review according to Sonja Foss and William Waters:[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. **Decide** on your areas of research. It's easy to get lost in massive amounts of material and get derailed from the research areas you are focused on.
2. **Search**: Look through databases and read abstracts. Find if there are any published bibliographies or literature reviews already in related areas. Remember to read the references in the sources you find (Google Scholar and Jstor can link you to works that reference that work as well as the references in the work). Be comprehensive, but don't get side-tracked. Set a time frame for yourself and find someone to keep you accountable to it.
3. **Sort:** Foss and Waters suggest looking for particular features in your sources and then typing out relevant excerpts. I would suggest writing summaries of major works AFTER reading and WITHOUT looking. I'd also suggest keeping a **running bibliography**, so you don't forget any citations. Consider Zotero or Refworks. Here are the features Foss and Waters suggest you look for:
* Claims, conclusions and findings about the constructs you are investigating.
* Definitions of key terms
* Calls for more research relevant to your project.
* Gaps you notice in the literature
* Disagreement about the constructs you are investigating.

**A Caveat:** Make sure you recognize differences between those sources that are **theoretically** significant to your project and those that are **contextually** relevant to your project. Chances are you need to know some key theorists very well in order to establish your theoretical framework. You will read these sources in depth. You will, however, read contextual works more quickly. These are articles that present research that is closely related to your research.

4. **Code** the literature. Mimicking a primary research process, the literature review research has now supplied you with data that need to be coded. Foss and Waters tell dissertation writers to cut up their excerpts into small pieces of paper and then create themed piles. Then place each pile into a labeled envelope.

5. Create your **Conceptual Schema**: Figure out the best way to organize the themes you've identified. You can do this in a similar cut and paste way by arranging slips of paper with titles of themes into different orders. You could draw a conceptual map, linking the themes together. Experiment with different ways to work this out.

6. **Write** a draft. Foss and Waters say you can start with any of your themes, since you've already mapped how they will go together. Each theme/section will need its own conceptual schema too.



***Now Let's Talk Oars:***

`Though I like the idea of arranging your own conceptual schema, this may seem daunting, and could lead you to formatting your literature review in an unconventional way, that may be innovative but ultimately could be problematic if your professor or committee is expecting a more standard approach.

To the left is a useful taxonomy of literature reviews that can serve as a heuristic for your writing when you feel lost. I'd like to pay particular attention to "Audience," "Coverage," and "Organization."

1. **Audience:** Remember why you are writing and for whom you are writing. Most immediately you are writing for your advisor and your committee. Secondarily, you are writing for a fairly specific audience of people like yourself who would find your research significant. You are not writing for a general audience. Keeping this in mind can help you refrain from spending too much of your time on the literature review summarizing other people's arguments while getting further and further away from your own. Your audience needs to know **why** you are reviewing the literature you are reviewing more than they need to be taught **what** the literature says. Why do you cover this literature in relation to your research question? What gaps do you notice that others may not have noticed yet?
2. **Coverage:** This relates back to the steps in creating your schema.
* You could do an ***exhaustive review*** and promise to cover everything, but I wouldn't recommend it if you want to finish your project at some point.
* So then you could do an ***exhaustive review with selective citation***. In this case, you would limit your review in some way: say, by only looking at articles in the last five years. There are obvious drawbacks to this approach as well, since you might miss crucial literature your committee and other scholars would expect you to cover and you might cover relatively unimportant sources that have had little impact in your research area.
* You could try to cover a ***representative sampling***of literature and make general inferences from this sample. The key here would be to somehow make sure the sample is representative.
* Lastly in Cooper's taxonomy, you could do a ***purposive*** sample. This means there is a purpose behind your sample other than broad representation. This could mean picking only the key or pivotal works in the area of research, though you will need to prove they are pivotal or key. I prefer to think of this approach as purposive in the sense that it clearly shows the gap you are hoping to fill in your own research. Relating it back to your purpose will help you "prove" that your selections are the "key" texts relating to your purpose. \*\*HOWEVER, in the research stage read more broadly, and then narrow it down. REMEMBER YOUR AUDIENCE.
1. **Organization:** This is inevitably the part of the literature review that students struggle with most. I suggest that you collect some **models** of literature reviews within your field of study. Don't read them thoroughly; just skim them for organizational features. How does the author break up the information? What are the key transitions she makes? How would you characterize the organization? Are the signposts (headings and subheadings) working for you? Make note of what you think works and does not work and make use of the features that seem to work.

At this stage it can be helpful to think of yourself as writing **a story** of the research you have done. Though the conversation metaphor is apt, conversation does not provide structure the way a **plotline** does. A play that is merely interesting dialogue can be fascinating, but it may not move you forward. You need to move your readers forward to the climax of your own research. There are three common "plotlines" to consider for organizing your literature review. It is also customary to do as Aristotle said, and have a beginning (introduction to topic and organization), a middle (body: plot) and an end (conclusion and recommendations: where are we now?). The main plotline occurs in the middle section. You do not have to follow these plotlines, but if you are feeling overwhelmed with your material, they are good starting points. Each is appropriate for a different focus or goal.

* ***The Historical Plotline****:* Once upon a time . . . This plot is organized chronologically, from the birth of the ancestor of the research question, to the ascension of her great-great-great descendent: your project. This plotline is best when the most important aspect of the story you are telling is the progression of ideas or methods over time that have lead to your research.
* ***The Conceptual Plotline****:* This plot is organized around central concepts that may occur across time and space. You've read novels like these, where a whole section is devoted to one aspect of the story involving many characters and time periods, and the next section still involves some of the same characters and time periods, but the focus is different. This works best if the concepts reinforce some theme you feel is central to your research.
* ***The Methodological Plotline****:* This plot is like the novel that has many narrators telling the story from differing points of view. In this case, you would organize your review around different research methodologies approaching similar sets of research questions. Obviously, this approach is best when researchers have employed many methodologies in researching your topic, or when your methodology is a large part of your contribution to the field of research.

Whether you choose one of these plotlines or your own, keep the plot in mind. Don't lose your audience in irrelevant subplots. Also, keep returning to the conversation metaphor. The plot connects through conversation. The literature you've reviewed responds and reacts to the literature you've reviewed. They are not discrete instances. They must be in conversation with one another. *Dialogue can make the plot!* Keep this in mind as you transition between sources, time periods, themes, and methodologies. They must link to form a story.

**Remember that you are the storyteller.** You are an interactive narrator, a character within the story. You must synthesize and analyze. You are a part of the conversation, even though you are not yet presenting the climax of your own research. You still must direct the conversation toward your research. You are in charge of the characters; they are not in charge of you.

***When to Dock the Boat:***

In the midst of the literature review process, it is easy to get lost and feel a bit like you are being pulled down by an undertow of all the voices that have come before you.

**Not all sources deserve the same amount attention!** One of the tricks to writing effective literature reviews is remembering that this is NOT the main point of your research project. This is just the preliminary context/conversation: the setting.

* You may find that many people have written similar things. In this case, you should condense them: “Many scholars have approached this problem in this way…” and cite all their work.
* It is also possible that one person or group has conducted pivotal research that many later scholars have built upon. In this case, spend more time on that original source, and condense the followers.
1. Sonja Foss and William Waters, *Destination Dissertation: A Traveler's Guide to a Done Dissertation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)