

CAAM 600

LITERATURE REVIEW

Purpose:

Your Literature Review chapter, sometimes called Background and Literature Review, situates your particular research within the context of both the immediate and the wider field. It shows that you are familiar with the key literature, that you know how your incremental contribution adds to what is already known, and that you are sufficiently scholarly to be able to evaluate the contributions of other researchers.

In some ways, the Literature Review is the most difficult section to write because it rests on such a breadth of knowledge. Before writing it, you must read widely in your field, identifying key papers, key findings, and key issues as they relate to your particular research focus. In it, you demonstrate how your work relates to work done by other researchers, both in a narrow sense and from a wider perspective. In other words, you

- clearly identify the focus of your own research;
- summarize and evaluate the key contributions of the research of others;
- indicate chronology if it is important;
- show how your work grows out of, adds to, modifies, improves, or even disputes work by other researchers in your field;
- delineate the issues raised by other researchers;
- comment on those issues, showing how you and others agree and disagree on them;
- place your own work within the context of those issues; and, in doing so,
- clearly differentiate your work from that of others.

Note: In some cases, an advisor may want the Literature Review incorporated into the Introduction or even broken into smaller portions and included in the body chapters. My preference is a thesis that begins with an *Introduction* that introduces the contents of the thesis and ends with a brief overview of each chapter. The next chapter would then be titled *Literature Review* or *Background and Literature Review*.

Content:

If you can identify a seminal work, that's a good place to start, explaining that work's key contribution. Then trace the additive developments in the field that have led up to the work you are focused on. Be specific about the actual contributions. Show the relationships among the findings. How did one contribution lead to another? Modify another? Improve on another? Identify and explain any disagreements about findings, methods, or interpretations. In other words, what are the issues people agree or disagree on? As you set up and write about the issues, comment on them, making clear what your stand is. If, for example, one paper validates the method you are using, say so. If you can cite work that validates your findings, say so because it's helpful to have allies. In other words, you must make your work an integral part of your expert discussion of issues and contributions.

Since you probably cannot cite every paper, choose the most important or representative ones. Certainly cite the big names and your colleagues. Authors frequently cited in other papers are a good place to start. Unless your field or advisor insists otherwise, do the authors

the courtesy of citing them by name. Do not, for example, say “[10] and [14] provided the next important insight.” Once you have named the authors in the first citation, you can move to “Smith et al. later modified their original algorithm by substituting X for Y” [12]. If you cite by bibliographic reference number, your readers will have to keep flipping to the Bibliography to see whom you are referencing.

As you write, keep in mind what one Rice professor says: “You must be in a dialogue with other researchers.”

Organization:

This is one of the most difficult chapters to organize because you are weaving so many different threads together into a coherent narrative. If chronology is important—and it usually is—you must show what came first, next, and concurrently in the development of findings that led up to your focus. You also need to include work currently being done by others, sometimes even if the results have not yet been published. Including the dates of the papers will help here.

Organizing simply by chronology is usually not sufficient, however, because you must identify and discuss any important issues and disagreements, showing how various authors agree or disagree. You may well want to organize by issues and then use chronology within the issue discussion. Comment on the issues as you discuss them.

In addition, throughout the Literature Review you must keep showing how all these findings, developments and issues relate to your own work. This is not the place for you to go into detail about your method, experimental setup, or results. You do need, however, to signal what you do and to make clear how your work compares and contrasts with the work of others. As you write, clearly identify YOUR work as yours. Writing “It has been observed that...” does not identify the observation as yours, for example.

Begin with a short introduction to the chapter that forecasts the issues. Use informative headings and sub-headings as guidelines. If a section has sub-sections, begin the section with a brief introductory sentence or two so that the reader will know what is coming. End with a paragraph that summarizes the argument you have made in the chapter. You may want, too, to have a final sentence that signals the contents of the next chapter.