Literature Reviews

The basics

UCSB McNair Scholars Program – Summer 2012
Definition(s)

- “Re-view” or look again at what’s been written on a particular topic
- Discussion of published scholarly work on a topic/in a research area
- Organized way to summarize, synthesize, make connections between and present literature on a topic
Dr. E’s Definition

- A bibliographic conversation between/among scholarly work on a topic
- With the added benefit of helping you situate yourself in the conversation
Purpose

Literature search and review on your topic

What are the key sources?
What are the major issues and debates about the topic?
What are the political standpoints?
What are the origins and definitions of the topic?

What are the key theories, concepts and ideas?
What are the epistemological and ontological grounds for the discipline?
How is knowledge on the topic structured and organised?
What are the main questions and problems that have been addressed to date?

How have approaches to these questions increased our understanding and knowledge?

Some of the questions the review of the literature can answer

Source: The Learning Centre UNSW http://www.loc.unsw.edu.au
Benefits of a Lit Review

- Provides guide to the literature on a topic
- Offers overview of previous work on a topic
- Enlarges your scope of knowledge about a topic
- Let’s you demonstrate command of the literature in your field
- Offers opportunity to conduct critical appraisal
- Challenges your critical and analytical skills
Some of what it is not

- Final reference list/bibliography for your paper
- A descriptive list of materials on your topic
- A synopsis
- A new contribution to scholarship/research
A successful literature review should

- Be organized around and directly related to your research question
- Synthesize results into what is/what is not known about the topic
- Identify areas of controversy/disagreement in the literature
- Help you identify/formulate questions that need further investigation
Before you begin:

- Review the assignment carefully
- Refine/narrow your topic
- Determine whether you want or need to include historic as well as current research
- Be selective
- Don’t ignore methodology
- Think about organization and how you want to present the sources, especially how best to make connections between/among sources
Not Everyone/Every Discipline...

- One size does not fit all
- But...one concept might

- Different disciplines, different needs – but all scholarship owes some debt to what came before
So...

- It might have a different look
- It might have a different “label”
- It might not be called out “as such” in your dissertation
- It might feel weird to do

But...(repeating myself):
- All scholarship owes some debt to what came before
- Literature reviews are one way to repay that debt
Literature Review Tutorial

- Libraries of Adelphi University. Conducting a Literature Review in Education and the Social Sciences
  - [http://libraries.adelphi.edu/research/tutorials/EdLitReview/content/](http://libraries.adelphi.edu/research/tutorials/EdLitReview/content/)
Where I got my information (truth in advertising)

- The Writing Center. University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
- University of California, Santa Cruz Library. Write a Literature Review
- The Writing Center. University of Wisconsin, Madison