

TOPICS IN PROFESSIONAL SOCIALIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT



PROTIP #4:
How to write a literature review
(or almost anything else)
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Almost everything you write as a scholar will require your presenting a review of the relevant literature on the topic. This provides a **summary of what is already known** about the problem, and sets the stage for **what should be done, or what you will be doing, to further advance knowledge** about the issue.

Whether your literature review will be included in a class assignment, a paper for publication, or as the first section of a report analyzing data, you should try to accomplish four things:

PERSUADE: Always keep in mind that you are writing an essay; and the definition of "essay" is "an attempt...to persuade." You are attempting to persuade your reader to view the accumulated knowledge about your topic according to your own interpretation -- an interpretation based on your own (superior) knowledge of the existing publications. In order to be successful at this attempt, you have to know what your point is. What does the literature show? On balance? You have to convey a clear idea of what your interpretation is.

SUMMARIZE: This is what most people see in a literature review -- a summary of the major studies or viewpoints on an issue. Since your reader will not be as knowledgeable as you about the topic, your task is to summarize the main ideas for him/her. Focus on the ideas and issues -- the generalizations -- and not on the details -- methods or procedures or specific findings (you can do this in passing, but the reader may become impatient if you seem to bog down in details) What's the main point of each study or viewpoint?

COMPARE AND CONTRAST: Controversies make for fascinating reading -- perhaps the most interesting thing about scholarship or science. And if an issue or perspective is intellectually important, there will (or should) be a controversy about it. In your literature review, try to focus on what might be controversial. Unfortunately, in the very young science of gerontology authors tend to be unsatisfyingly polite; they downplay controversy, and you might have to look hard for essential differences. Nevertheless: remember that **to compare and to contrast** is the basic method of science, and this is what you must do in a literature review.

SYNTHESIZE: The most impressive and convincing literature reviews are those which (1) provide a succinct summary of important previous contributions; (2) compare and contrast each of those cited to others; and (3) present a

conceptual synthesis which may provide new insight. The synthesis often presents some new dimension along which the existing knowledge (and controversies) may be viewed, based on some other theory or perspective. General social theory (see Turner or Collins, or Passuth and Bengtson) is one strategy; axiomatic logic is another; specific empirical generalizations is a third. Whatever the strategy, the goal is to suggest something new: perhaps a synthesis of the contrasting positions.

SET**THE CONTEXT:**

In many instances your literature review will be a preface: the basis for you to support your own study of the topic. Again, the goal is to persuade. Outline your review of the existing literature so that it leads directly to your study approach, and perhaps to the hypotheses or models you will be testing in your empirical investigation. Setting the context also suggests the justification for the study: why it is important, why funding agencies should support it, why a faculty committee should approve it, why a reader should be interested in it. Focus on the ideas, the intellectual plot-line of your attempt to persuade, as providing the context to support the investigation you propose or are reporting.