

LIT REVIEW "CHEAT SHEET" (SHORT CUT FORMULA)
**HOW TO WRITE A FIRST-RATE LITERATURE REVIEW IN A HURRY,
FOR STUDENTS WHOSE ADVISORS ARE TOO BUSY TO SHOW THEM HOW**

Many thesis and dissertation writers do not understand the purpose of a literature (lit) review. The lit review takes the reader on a tour of the "landscape" of the published literature concerning the topic under study.

Think of yourself as a tour guide for your readers. Instead of a country, however, you are giving a tour of a topic of study. Just as a tour guide might begin with the city center or "old town," from which the newer parts of the area developed, so you might begin your tour with the classic studies on which newer research is based. The sequence in which the tour is conducted may vary but the idea that new scholarship builds upon what already exists is a constant.

It is important to keep in mind that **the lit review should be concerned primarily with big-picture ideas, in the context of *comparisons, patterns and trends***, rather than individual data points, even though individual pieces of information are often included. In other words, good literature reviews typically deal more with ideas and concepts than with facts.

Another analogy is to imagine yourself flying in a helicopter. When the chopper is on the ground, you are just going to see what is immediately around you (facts, so to speak). As you take off and become airborne, you will see some ideas. You then need to rise higher still, to get a view of the larger picture, to see not just individual ideas but groups of ideas (categories) and overall trends.

You may be familiar with the expression "missing the forest for the trees." That is the point implicit in the expression. To see the forest, you must rise a certain level above the trees. The trees represent the various miscellaneous facts. The forest represents the overall "big picture."

Here is **a simple three-step short-cut to getting started**. To prepare, you will need to clear a large surface, such as a spacious table top or floor area, on which to work. You will also need to print out paper copies of all the articles you (at least tentatively) wish to cover in the lit review. Gather up the books you want to cover, including books with chapters you want to cover.

- 1.** Underline and highlight key points in the articles. If you do not own the books you will be using, use removable post-it notes to flag key points and ideas. (If you already know your source materials well, you may skip this step.)
- 2.** Put post-it notes with category titles on top of each publication.
- 3.** Sort the publications into categories, based on key themes and concepts. Be prepared to keep shuffling things around, until you have arrived at a good set of categorizations.

Congratulations! You now have a framework you can use, for the next stage, below.

Here now is a five-point short cut to writing the “guts”/core of the lit review.

1. CONCEPT: clearly explain it, telling why it is important and how it relates to the study topic.

Example: The relationship between ethnicity and pre-term births.

NOTE: You do NOT include “encyclopedia-article-type” information. Clue: If it sounds like something out of an encyclopedia article, it’s probably not appropriate for your lit review.

2. LIST the publications that belong in this category.

Example: “Five publications were located that focused exclusively on this topic.”

3. CITE the main points relating to the concept, as described in these publications.

4. COMPARE & CONTRAST the publications in the subcategory/topic area.

5. POINT OUT GAPS and problems that remain.

Example: Although these five studies have all done X, they have failed to do Y. The main problem that remains in this area is [blank].

NOTE: You want to “sandwich” the above between an introduction and a conclusion. For the conclusion, before you write it, make up a little OUTLINE/FRAMWORK of the main points you want to include. Arrange them in a logical order before you start writing. And do your best to TRANSITION from one point to another.

A lit review typically begins by briefly summarizing the key problem under study and reviewing the methodology that was used to locate and then select the publications that are covered. Following the methodology, it is usually advisable to offer the reader a brief “roadmap” (overview) of the journey they will be taking during the course of the chapter.

It is important to make it clear to the reader how your study will fill an existing gap in the literature, building upon what has been published before you, to make some significant contribution to the literature (published work in the field). Your contribution may be modest but it should nonetheless in some way be significant (of potential importance to others).

It can be helpful to look at good examples of academic lit reviews. I can point you to some of those and I can work with you to develop your lit review, as well as the other parts of your thesis or dissertation project. For details regarding my services, you are invited to visit either BestDissertationEditor.com or BestThesisEditor.com.