

Getting Started: Assessing Sources/Creating a Matrix/Writing a Literature Review

If you're new to academic research and are writing an argumentative paper for the first time, you will need to first spend time organizing, assessing, and “unpacking” your sources. Once you can see clearly what kinds of voices and perspectives address your research questions, you can enter into the conversation by addressing counter-arguments as well as articulating and supporting your own arguments.

Getting the basic steps down now will help as you move on to upper level classes in your major.

The basics:

To achieve the kind of familiarity with sources required for incorporating them into your own arguments and demonstrating your knowledge, you will need to know: **a)** how to assess the sources, **b)** create a matrix, **3)** what's expected when writing a literature review.

ASSESSING SOURCES

Begin the process of evaluating the sources you are finding by first reading the text and summarizing the author's main points by making notes, written or mental, annotations, or other means. In academic writing, you also need to be fully informed about the sources that look relevant to your research: for example, who is the writer and what are his/her credentials, what is the purpose of and audience for the publication and how does a particular source fit into the larger, ongoing conversation about this question. In other words, look at the factors external to the source in order to help you determine its credibility and authority. Answer the following sets of questions for each of your sources:

Author

Conduct a brief search on the author to determine his/her expertise, reputation, and credibility.

Look at citations, articles, and books by this author to find information about who the author is, what his/her credentials are, and what occupation or position s/he holds.

Publication and Audience

1. Examine the publication for which the author is writing to determine the author's intended audience, and the publication's reputation, credibility, and target reader/researcher.
2. Look in the text for clues to what audience the author is addressing, e.g., specialized or general vocabulary, types of sources cited, explicit references to the audience.

3. Look at the publication itself: front/back cover, submission guidelines, editorial board, etc., for an indication of audience and types of articles. Once you're satisfied that your source is credible and reliable, you are ready to analyze the text itself.

Argument/Evidence

1. Carefully read the text, looking at the evidence the author is using and the structure of the argument (e.g., whether it moves logically from point to point).
2. Identify the range of evidence (personal opinions or observations, research, case studies, analogies, statistics, facts, quotations, etc.).
3. Assess how the author presents and discusses alternative perspectives in relation to his/her thesis?
4. Locate any gaps or inconsistencies in the development of the argument.

Relevance/Consistency

1. Analyze the text in relation to your question and developing thesis, and in relation to other sources you've been reading.
2. If it supports your thinking, identify the assumptions/biases/perspectives influencing the writer, and how they compare to your own and those of other writers with whom this one agrees.
3. If it is an opposing perspective, identify the assumptions/biases/perspectives influencing the writer, and how they compare to your own and those of other writers with whom this one agrees?
4. Determine how this source contributes to your understanding or to generating new questions in your thinking?

CREATING A MATRIX

From your initial forays into the sources, you should have some sense of the range of ways authors answer your question and that there are, in fact, several reasonable and defensible answers to your question. It is important to begin understanding what influences different writers to answer your question differently. You will want to start identifying the perspectives, schools of thought, sets of variables, etc., that influence the question you're trying to answer. You will also want to organize your readings into categories that will help you choose the main arguments in support of and in opposition to your thesis.

WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW

Bearing in mind that a viable research question produces more than one reasonable answer, the literature review:

- Describes the kind of search that was conducted
- Summarizes, analyzes, and organizes the various responses found in the scholarly conversation regarding the question

- Explains why different scholars provide different answers for the same or related questions (i.e. accounts for the debate/tension in the literature)

As a result, the literature review does more than report the conclusions of researchers; it accounts for HOW those conclusions are reached.

The literature review plays an important role in research projects because:

- It locates our research question within the scholarly debate relevant to our concerns
- We don't need to reinvent the wheel, so we need to discover what has been done and represent it
- We let the reader see the history of the question and demonstrate that we have done our homework
- We identify what has not been done, or what has not been done well

Use the following steps in writing your literature review:

1. Organize your sources by detecting a pattern that helps you explain why one group of sources comes up with one answer and another group comes up with another answer. Creating a matrix is a very effective way of doing this.
2. Summarize these different groups of sources in terms of how they address the question: what methodology, evidence, critical concepts, etc. do they employ?
3. Analyze the content of these sources in terms of the answer they provide to your central question or in terms of the question they raise (which may be slightly different from your question). Show how they offer important insights. Show how they neglect particular areas.

This document is based on "Integrating Writing: Assessing Sources/Writing a Literature Review," (<http://www.bothell.washington.edu/writingcenter/writing/reviews>).