



Organizing Sources for Literature Reviews

Preparation for most writing assignments includes reading and organizing information. While it may be tempting to rush through these steps, successful students make sure they create time to engage with their sources and think about how they can integrate the information. When working on an assignment that requires you to weave sources together, you may want to consider various factors to test out how your sources relate to each other. This handout provides some areas to consider when exploring how different sources relate to one another.

How Sources Relate to One Another:

- **Definitions:** Sometimes different sources will use similar words but use them in different ways to achieve different ends. A literature review is an opportunity to define the key terms in your project and explain where your ideas align with the topic. You will place your definitions of key terms in relation to other works during this stage of the process.
- **Length:** The reader determines the importance of a source, in part, by the space you give it. In your literature review, you want to consider the amount of space you give to each source. You want to meaningfully engage with foundational sources. You also want to balance these sources with others that are briefly discussed. You do not want to spark questions that you cannot answer in your assignment.
- **Benefits & Drawbacks:** When assessing sources strengths and weaknesses in your literature review, be sure to give credit where it is due. Be generous with your sources. Every work has flaws, but also value. You should ensure that you do not falsely discredit a work that you include. Otherwise, the reader may ask: if this work is so problematic, why are you discussing it?
- **Gaps & Concentrations:** Because a literature review is a purpose-driven document, you can use it to highlight a gap in the current literature. You can also use it to develop a particular concentration within a larger topic. By positioning yourself within the field, you can locate the gap that your work will fill. You can also indicate the limits of your project by suggesting that you are only focusing on a particular subsection of a theory or a methodology.

Dos and Don'ts of Literature Reviews

When you bring your sources together, try to keep in mind the following “do”s and “don’t”s:

Do:

- Organize your sources into categories that reflect a connection to your research question. Do not just sort by subject.
- Use signal phrases/reporting expressions (author + verb) and demonstrate the “conversation” in the field, such as:
 - “Derrida suggests...”
 - “Foucault argues...”
- Address contested territory in the field.
- Focus on how the literature ties into what you are doing, rather than attempting to make the literature review exhaustive (including everything).

Don't:

- Give a sequential summary of articles.
- Have one paragraph per source (instead use as many paragraphs as needed to provide adequate treatment).
- Leave the reader wondering "why is this here?"
- Include irrelevant material.