Mastering the Literature Review

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Outline

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red = interactive

Thinking About Scale

General definition:
"A high-level evaluation of the literature in a topic."

Difference in scale

disciplines:
Sociology ● Technology ● Information Science

field:
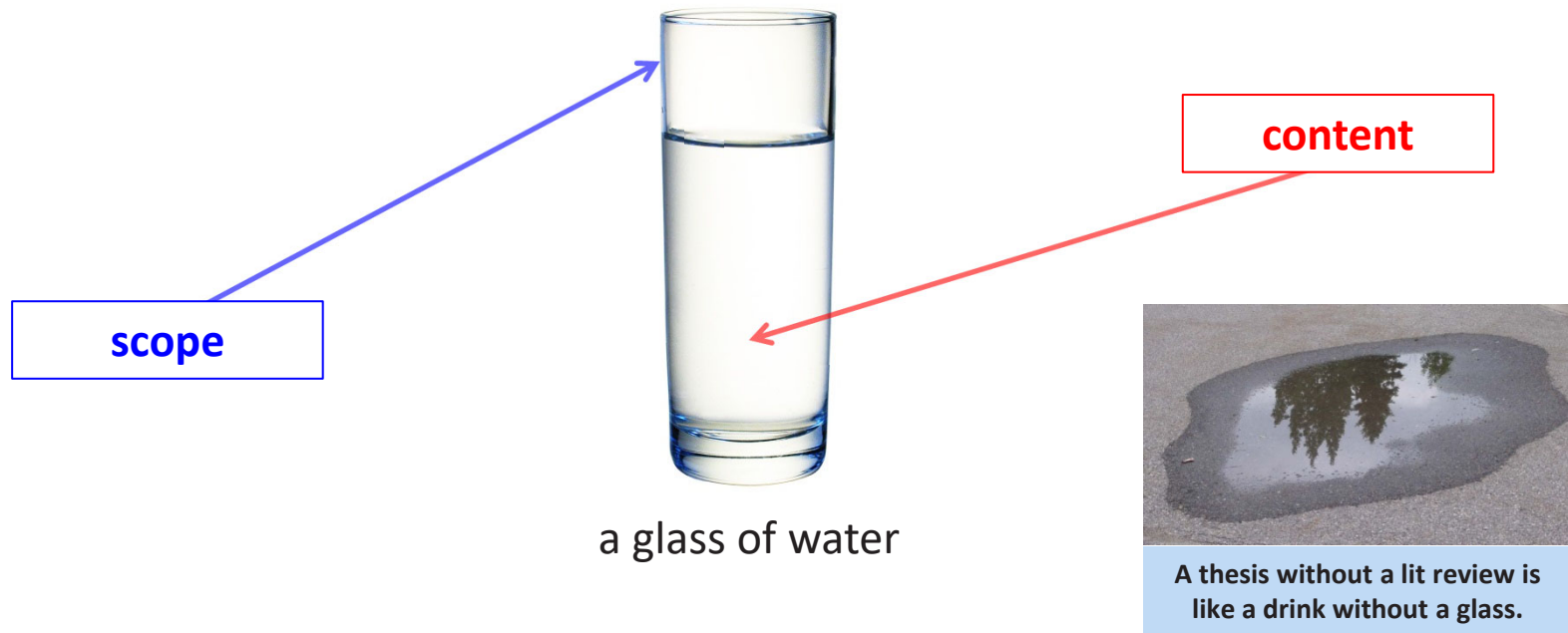effects of technology on society

topics:
efficacy of 911 call system
efficacy of 911 system in responding to medical emergencies
efficacy of 911 system in responding to stroke victims

Thinking About Scope

scope

content

a glass of water

A thesis without a lit review is like a drink without a glass.

The "glass of water" has two parts: **scope** and **content**.

So, too, does research literature. Its **scope** is described in the **literature review**. Its **content** is described in the **background chapter**, and elsewhere in the thesis, where relevant.

Thinking About Scope
Random Examples from Academia

Scope vs. **Content**

- **"Sediment-bound Arsenic and Uranium Within the Bowman-Haley Reservoir, North Dakota,"** Lance N. Larson & James J. Stone, *Water, Air and Soil Pollution* 219.1-4, July 2011.

- **"Biped Locomotion on Irregular Terrain,"** Barbaraellen McCown-McClintick, Ph.D. Thesis (computer simulations), July 1994.

- **"New Data Compression Algorithm and its Comparative Study with Existing Techniques,"** Rakesh Waghulde, Harshal Gurjar, Vishal Dholakia, G P. Bhole, *International Journal of Computer Applications* 102.7, 2014.

- **"Estimates of Performance in the Rate of Decline of Under-Five Mortality for 113 Low- and Middle-Income Countries, 1970-2010,"** Stephane Verguet & Dean T. Jamison, *Health Policy and Planning* 29.2, March 2014.

Research Question and Literature Review

The research question and the literature review are tightly bound. The research question establishes its own subfield. The literature review assesses that subfield.

Scope and scale
- The research question must be carefully chosen because it will define the scope and scale of the research, *and the scope of the literature review*.

A shared boundary
- The research question establishes a boundary, both for the research *and the literature review*.

Calibration
- The research question and the literature review ***evolve together***. The question guides the literature-review research, which allows fine-tuning of the question.

Research Question and Literature Review

Example topic: effectiveness of 911 system in responding to stroke victims

Question: How does 911 assistance aid stroke victims?

What's the basic factor that links the 911 system and the stroke problem?

Scope vs. Content

Defining the **Scope**:
- 911 response times
  - goals of 911 system
  - date of studies
  - state of technology
  - vicinity of studies
  - *studies that track time*
  - training of responders
  - comparing alternatives to 911
- Effects of stroke
  - definition of "stroke"
  - *studies that track time*
  - benefits of early treatment
  - training/equipment required for early treatment

Defining the **Content**:
- 911 response times
  - history of 911 system
  - prior successes
  - what is the data?
  - results of similar studies
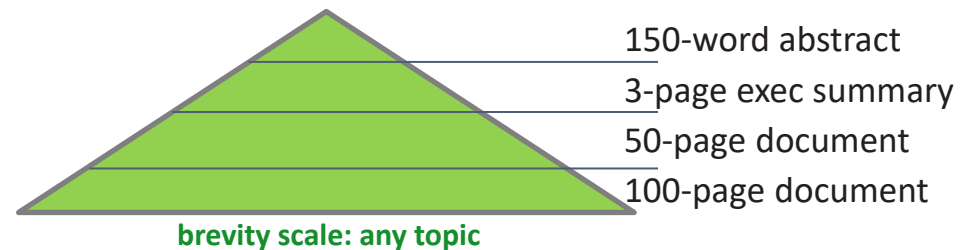- Effects of stroke
  - medical analysis

The Literature Review: What it is

"A high-level evaluation of the literature in a topic."

o Limited in scope by relevance to research question

o Literature usually in the foreground
  - "A study of studies"
  - Sources usually named
  - Heavily cited; footnotes or in-text cites

o Summary and synthesis to fit topic into the broader context of the field
  - Main ideas
  - Schools of thought
  - Landmark documents
  - Fundamental definitions

o Focused, not exhaustive

o Up-to-date

o *Summary: High-level evaluation of what we know to date*

150-word abstract
3-page exec summary
50-page document
100-page document
brevity scale: any topic

The Literature Review: What it isn't

A literature review is _not_:

- o Background

- o Mere summary; or
- o Exhaustive summary

- o List of sources; or
- o Annotated bibliography

- o Evaluation of reviewed, but not relevant, sources

- o A forum for new research

Types of Literature Review

Three main types:

- o Standalone
  - Big picture of topic
  - Not connected to a research question
  - Aggregates disparate ideas
  - *Thesis potential?*

- o Thesis/dissertation proposal
  - Preliminary
  - Exploratory
  - Incomplete

- o Thesis/dissertation
  - Refined
  - Focused
  - Thorough

Master's Thesis vs. Ph.D. Dissertation

Master's thesis: Application of the knowledge gained through your degree program to a real-world problem. More likely to test existing theories.

Ph.D. dissertation: Contribution of new knowledge to the field. More likely to address foundational knowledge: questions in the theoretical domain or fundamental methodologies.

Thesis vs. Dissertation Lit Review

Similarities

- Evaluates the literary foundation for the research.

- Establishes the broader context that the research fits into.

- **Establishes the originality of the research.**

Differences

Scope

- Master's thesis: Narrower. Applied theory. Describes sources used in the thesis.
- Ph.D. dissertation: Broader. Foundational. Describes main ideas in the field, where they came from, and how your work will modify or supplant them.

Scale

- No specific length requirement; depends on the context. But . . .
  - Master's thesis: Shorter; approximately 3-5 pages.
  - Ph.D. dissertation: Longer; approximately 20-50 pages.
- Keep in mind:
  - Literature reviews are pithy.
  - Too much literature may indicate too broad a topic.

Role of the Advisor

This workshop presents the by-the-books academic definition of a literature review.

The ultimate requirement for the content of the literature review is your advisor's expectation.

Advisors can also provide:

- Names of key works and authors

- Examples of well-crafted literature reviews

- Feedback on your draft literature review

Writing Center coaches can review your work at any stage

Critical Nature of the Literature Review

Key Traits of a Good Researcher

Inquisitiveness
- The courage to push one's mind into the unknown.
- The ability to ask good questions and seek answers.

Relentlessness
- The drive to be as thorough as possible.
- The fear that useful sources have been overlooked.

Skepticism
- Doubt is healthy. Take everything with a grain of salt.
- Hold facts, ideas and opinions to the highest possible standard of truth.

"Take nothing on its looks; take everything on evidence. There's no better rule."
—Jaggers the attorney, in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1860)

Critical Nature of the Literature Review

Potential Deficiencies of the Existing Literature

The value of identifying weakness
- Research requires scrutiny; the more, the better. The best research stands up.
- Agreement is not usually the path to originality.

Areas of potential weakness:
- Lack of theoretical framework
- Lack of consensus among experts
- Incongruity between theory and facts
- Overly optimistic assumptions
- Gaps
- New field
- Knowledge that is simply wrong . . . Or:
    - Out of date
    - Contradictory
    - Insufficient
    - Statistically insufficient
    - Logically weak; unconvincing
    - etc.

- Biases:
    - Methodological
    - Paradigm
    - Discipline
    - Institutional
    - Cultural
    - Stockholm Syndrome
    - etc.

red = questionable scholarship

Critical Nature of the Literature Review

Potential Strengths of the Existing Literature

Areas of potential strength:

- Valid theoretical framework
- Agreement among experts
- Congruity between theory and facts
- Knowledge that is current . . . Or:
    - Consistent
    - Sufficient
    - Logically coherent
    - Statistically valid
    - Unbiased
    - etc.

Substance of the Literature Review

- *Evaluate* the existing literature.
- *Argue* in support of your evaluation.

Organization and Writing of a Literature Review

Preparation for the Literature Review

- Document your reading as you go.
  - Enter complete bibliographic information.

- Note-taking
  - Don't rely on your memory.
  - Make note of important quotes and other valuable material.
  - Tag quotes ("useful quote I found") to prevent confusing material with your own.

- Keywords and key phrases
  - Note important terms to make notes text-searchable.
  - Be consistent in terminology/spelling, even if sources vary.

- Organize notes by theme
  - Basic definitions
  - Main ideas
  - Methodologies
  - Areas of research

Organization and Writing of a Literature Review

A Literature Review has Structure

- Introduction
  - Scope of the review
  - Describe the structure
  - A thesis statement for the review itself
    - "The efficiency of the 911 system has been studied on numerous occasions, as has the need for early treatment of stroke victims, but there has been no recent effort to connect these two problem domains."

- Organization by themes, not sources
  - Section headings; import if lit review runs long
  - Keep evaluations brief, high-level, and accurate
  - If useful, quantify the literature in a table

- Optionally, a conclusion
  - If a grand synthesis is needed
  - How the research question will fit into existing knowledge
    - "This study will show that early intervention, facilitated by the 911 system, can play a significant role in minimizing the long-term damages from stroke."

Literature Review: Example

Model Literature Review E – "The Prevalence of Stalking Among College Students"

Length

    Is this a long document?

Read

    Don't get sidetracked on the content

Identify

1. Scope
2. Organization
3. Other key lit review elements

Elements
- high-level writing/synthesis
- research question/thesis
- gap in literature
- evaluation/criticism
- definitions
- broader context
- boundary definitions
- timeliness
- justification of study
- organization by theme (next slide)

Literature Review: Example

Model Literature Review E – "The Prevalence of Stalking Among College Students"

Identify organization

Paragraph(P)-Line(L)

P1-L1:	vignette
P2-L18:	reported prevalence rates
P3-L33:	negative effects of stalking
P4-L57, P5-L79:	measurement of prevalence rates
P6-L88:	definitions
P7-L97:	assessing whether culture of violence exists
P8-L114:	application of social norms theory
P9-L136:	*purpose of study*

Literature Review: Example

Model Literature Review E – "The Prevalence of Stalking Among College Students"

Identify elements

- high-level writing/synthesis: L20-22, based on 6 sources; L33-36, 7 sources
- research question/thesis: L136-139
- gap in literature: L74-78
- evaluation/critical elements: P4-6 and L104-107
- fundamental definitions: P6
- broader context: P8
- elements that define boundaries: P1 and L63-65
- timeliness: 2012 article; Reference dates, 1997-2010
- justification of study: entire lit review

Bibliography/Resources

❏ Books

[Current work is slanted toward the social sciences.]

Galvan, Jose L. *Writing Literature Reviews: A Guide for Students of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 5th
    ed. Glendale, CA: Pyrczak Publishing, 1999. https://libsearch.nps.edu/vufind/Record/759830
    [Includes nine examples, two to nine pages in length. Book focuses on *standalone* lit reviews.]

Hart, Chris. *Doing a Literature Review: Releasing the Social Science Research Imagination*. Thousand Oaks,
    CA: SAGE Publications, 1998. https://libsearch.nps.edu/vufind/Record/654014
    [First full book on literature reviews.]

❏ Article/video

Knopf, Jeffrey W. "Doing a Literature Review." *Political Science & Politics* (January 2006): 127-132.
    https://my.nps.edu/web/gwc/resources#L
    [Nice article by former NPS NSA professor.]

Knopf presentation based on his article [1:17:31]:
    http://www.nps.edu/video/portal/Video.aspx?enc=VQRI1%2ft0jcMx3RtMJ3k4hSFXkXRQBfXP

❏ Graduate Writing Center

- Links to resources:
    https://my.nps.edu/web/gwc/resources
    [Writing Resources by Topic: Literature Reviews]

- Make an appointment with a writing coach:
    https://my.nps.edu/web/gwc/wconline-redirect

The End

Comments? — Questions?

Slides at:
https://my.nps.edu/web/gwc/resident-workshops

Comments and suggestions welcome. Please email John at:
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