

Lit reviews: video script

Hi, and welcome to the second teaching video about writing your dissertation. This time, I'll be talking to you about how to write the lit review chapter. Although this chapter will actually be the second chapter of your dissertation, as it comes after the introduction, I recommend that you leave your introduction to near the end of the process (when it'll be much easier to write), and begin by writing your lit review.

This video is intended to help you to understand what a literature review is and how to write an excellent one which will impress your markers, focusing on how to describe research to your reader. As I've mentioned before, I'm happy to meet people individually to give you feedback on your writing – please use the link to book an appointment, and you can email me a draft before coming if you like – if you do send me something, please make sure it's at least one full working day in advance of your appointment. Otherwise, print out your draft and bring it along with you.

Let's consider the lit review chapter. If you've done a research proposal, this is something you've already had a go at, so you should be a bit familiar with it and have had some useful feedback about how to improve for the dissertation. But even if you're tackling this for the first time, don't worry – it's similar to lots of the other academic writing you've done so far which has used research evidence, so you can build on your existing capabilities.

So, what is a lit review all about? Essentially, it's the part of your dissertation where you show that you've got an excellent knowledge of research in the area that you're investigating, and also that answering your own research questions is necessary because they're not covered by existing information. You can think of it like a scaffold, as something that is supporting your whole dissertation, as your own new research emerges from what other researchers have previously discovered. So, it's important that you write clearly about what other people have found out, and that you give a balanced account, representing the different ideas, explanations and opinions about each aspect of your topic. You want to demonstrate to your reader that you know your stuff – you can identify the key theories and important arguments, and you've dedicated time to looking into this topic and have become an expert. This chapter is where you provide the context for your project, by showing how it fits in to existing ideas and knowledge, and also where you show that there's a rationale for your project - a reason why the questions you're asking are both important, and also look at the topic in a way that's going to push things forward rather than just replicating what's already been done. Finally, you need to create a narrative for your reader as you take them through the different research findings. The biggest mistake people make in a lit review is to just give your reader a big list of summaries of the research you've read, without showing how they connect together and lead to your own project. Don't just state what you've read – bring it together to tell the story of this topic, and your dissertation.

In this way, writing your lit review becomes a bit like making a cake. If you're baking, you will start with individual ingredients – perhaps butter, sugar, flour and eggs, and then bring them together to make something that's more than the sum of its parts. In your lit review, your ingredients will be the existing research that's been done, so the different themes that make up your topic (where you breakdown your overall area into different aspects, so if your dissertation was on how friendship groups affect the purchase of luxury shoes you might look at the influence of friends on purchase behaviour in general, and luxury shoe purchase behaviour), your ingredients will also be the particular debates that researchers are having (so, for example, if you're investigating obesity you might show how some people emphasise diet as a factor whilst others consider psychological aspects to be more important), and other ingredients will be the key theories that have been established, and any particularly important or seminal research that has been influential in changing the way people think about your topic.

So you bring all these different ideas and theories together, and just like how in baking, the ingredients come together to make a cake, in your lit review, your ingredients come together to produce the outcome of your research project – the questions you investigate emerge from the existing field of knowledge in this area.

Now you know what a lit review is, for the next section of this video, I'm going to talk about the actual process of how you go about creating your lit review chapter.

As with any piece of writing, planning is key. If you dedicate some time to thinking about how you're going to structure and arrange all of the research that you've made notes on, the actual writing will be made a lot easier. First of all, consider the overall structure of your chapter. Are you going to discuss how the research has progressed chronologically? Or will you arrange it by different themes? It doesn't matter which you choose – different orders will make sense for different kinds of topics. The important thing is that you make a decision. When you're doing the reading for this chapter, your process of finding research will usually be fairly chaotic – you might jump around between different aspects of your topic, following trails of references that you find in each new article. Your job in planning is to smooth out this process, and create a way of organising your chapter which is clearly structured for your reader. As I said earlier, this is something you'll already have experience of doing, when you've written essays or reports previously in your course – this is just on a bigger scale! So, the overall process will start with reading critically and making notes, then you'll plan and organise this information, and only then begin writing.

When you've got loads of notes on different pieces of research, it can be hard to see how you can divide these into sub-topics. One way to make this process easier is to bring the research together so you can get a clear overview of the information you have. So, either get a large piece of paper, and write one sentence summaries of each bit of research as a list, or use a post-it note for each summary. Then, once you can see what you have, you

can start seeing patterns between the research, and the different sub-topics should emerge which you can group together into themes which will be used to create the subheadings in your chapter. This method will also make you aware of the gaps, or in other words, which sub-topics only have one or two pieces of evidence. To fill these gaps, you will need to go and find some more research in these areas and do some more reading. If you have difficulty in finding particular information, speak to one of the librarians for help.

In the next section, we're going to think about how to describe the research information in your writing. Previously, I talked about the importance of telling a story and not writing the review as a list – in this section we'll think about how to show the connections between different pieces of research.

Good writing is always focused on a reader, so a useful starting point is to concentrate on what your reader needs to know, rather than what you might want to tell them – these aren't always the same thing! When describing a piece of research, your reader needs to know what the research was about, but they don't necessarily need to know all the details. Usually you'll be giving your reader a short summary in a sentence or so: something like "Cerise and Azure (2016) suggest that celebrity endorsements are more effective for lower-end products than luxury ones'. You don't always need to go into how this was established, or details of the methodology – just think about giving your reader the information they need to understand the point you're making, and no more than that. Obviously, if it's a very relevant piece of research, or a key theory, you might need a little more detail – your job as a writer is to decide when this is the case, focusing always on what your reader needs to know. And your reader doesn't just require you to describe the piece of research, but also to analyse it - to explain to them what its significance is, what the implications of this knowledge are, and how it connects to the other research you're discussing, and your own project. As this is a piece of writing, you can't have an actual dialogue with your reader. Instead, you need to anticipate the kinds of questions your reader might have, and make sure you are providing answers. When you have a draft, read through it and ask the kinds of questions your reader will have: most commonly these will be "what point are you actually making here, or, in other words, why are you giving me this information?" "What's your evidence for making this point, or, do you have some research or data to back this up?" And finally, the most important one "so what, or why have you included these points?" If you ensure that you have pre-empted the "so what" question throughout your lit review, you'll have gone a long way towards making sure that your reader understands the connections between the research you describe, and how this evidence relates to your choice of research questions to investigate.

You can think about each piece of research you discuss as a Lego brick. So, when writing your lit review, imagine you've got a huge pile of these bricks in front of you. You don't want to just scoop them up and present them to your reader in this jumbled-up manner, and expect them to work out how the bricks go together.

Instead, you want to make something out of the bricks. You need to connect the bricks together to make an overall object – such as this lovely dinosaur. So you need to show your reader how the different bits of research fit together to make the wider picture of the whole topic you're looking at.

And you don't necessarily need to make something especially exciting, like the dinosaur of the previous picture. You can just make something simple like a house – the important thing is to make sure you are constructing something for your reader, and not leaving them to connect the bricks themselves. Sometimes this act of construction seems a bit superfluous. You might think to yourself “well, in the pile of bricks, there were a couple of doors, and some windows so how can my reader not look at this and understand that it fits together to make a house?” But firstly, your reader might not come to the same conclusion as you – they might think that the bricks actually make a rocket ship, and so you need to guide them to your own interpretation. And secondly, when you're being assessed, you're given credit for understanding the material – if you don't show that you understand that the significance of these bricks is that they connect together to make a house, then you can't be given the marks.

So what kind of language can you use to show the associations between research evidence? Let's look at an example. Let's imagine that a student is writing about the source attractiveness model. In their first sentence, they explain what it is. They say: “The source attractiveness model suggests that consumers have a more positive response to attractive people and the effectiveness of the message depends on the similarity, familiarity and liking for an endorser (McGuire, 1985).” In the next sentence, they say: “Therefore attractive celebrities may be more successful in changing beliefs, and generate purchase intention (Carroll, 2009).” You can see here that by using the word ‘therefore’, they are showing the reader that they understand the implications of this theory when applied to celebrity endorsement. Their third sentence says: “However, Ohanian (1991) points out that most celebrities are attractive and hence the overall impact of this variable might be weak.” By using the word ‘however’, they are indicating that there is another point of view, and that this evidence offers some kind of a contradiction to the previous piece of research. In the final sentence we have here, they say: “Equally, Erdogan (1999) notes that while attractive celebrities may enhance attitudes towards advertising and brands, whether they are able to create purchase intentions is ambiguous.” Here, the word “equally” shows their reader that this point adds further evidence to the previous point. These signalling words help your reader to understand how the research is connected and are vital parts of each paragraph. There are lots of different words you can use: in the academic development community on GCU Learn, there is a handout which lists lots of useful signalling words to add interest and variety to your writing. Take a look and download it after you finish watching the video.

If you've been to my previous sessions about writing, you might remember me talking about the DISCO structure for paragraphs. This ensures that your paragraphs are clear

and effective by having them begin with a description sentence that tells your reader what point will be made, then include both information, and scrutiny of this evidence, and finish with a conclusion sentence which draws the information together and demonstrates its overall significance, and also an onward link to the next paragraph. If you need to familiarise yourself with this structure, please come along to my workshop on paragraphs or take a look at the information on the academic development community on GCU Learn. In a lit review specifically, you can use your description and conclusion sentences to make sure your reader understands how the research you're discussing fits together – so these sentences can show the connections between different research and aspects of a topic, they can explain the contexts of the evidence, and they can show what the contribution of the sources is to the overall area you're looking at.

Here are some examples of description sentences that you might use to start off your paragraphs. So, you could begin with: “a major theme for this study is X, because...”. This clarifies why you are looking at a particular aspect of your topic. Another initial sentence might be: “the studies on X are particularly relevant to the aim of...” – again this ties an area of research to your overall project. If you want to show your reader that you're focusing on the crucial viewpoints, you could open your paragraph with “some authors have mainly been interested in questions concerning X and Y (Smith, 2001; Jones ...).” Or similarly, you could start by stating that “much of the available literature on X deals with the question of ...”. If you take a look at the link I've given you to the academic phrasebank, you can see lots of other examples to help you construct your own sentences which will guide your reader through your paragraphs.

Finally, as with all writing, it's necessary to edit your work carefully to make it as concise as it can be. This doesn't only help ensure that your writing is more efficient, so that you are making more points with fewer words and means you can adhere to the word count more easily, but being more direct also makes your writing easier to understand. I've given you two examples of sentences that aren't concise. Pause the video here, and have a go at changing the sentences so they deliver the same meaning, but in fewer words. Post your answers to the padlet wall in the link given on this page.

Here's the solutions that I came up with. Pause the video while you read them through and compare them to the ones you created. You should be able to see that these are more direct than the originals, and so are also much clearer. Were your suggestions similar? Or did you manage to make them even more concise? How did they compare to other ones on the padlet wall?

In this video, we've talked about the most important aspects of the literature review. Remember that it should offer a scaffold for your dissertation, by giving your reader context for your project, and demonstrating why there is a need for the research that you will undertake. Don't forget that your lit review should not just be a summary of the articles, reports and book chapters that you've read – it's important to make the

connections between the different pieces of evidence and your own research aims clear to your reader. And, like any piece of academic writing, your paragraphs have to be clearly structured and you need to be concise and direct and considerate of your reader. One important way to make sure that you write an effective lit review is to spend some time reading other people's, and seeing if they fit these criteria, and thinking about the good and bad aspects of their writing. This is something you can do by looking at the example dissertations online in the GCU library catalogue, and the printed copies in the library. It's also something I'll be taking you through in the face to face session on literature reviews.