

Writing a Literature Review Mini-Lesson

Lesson Objective

Students will learn how to write a short literature review essay for disciplines in the social sciences and humanities based on scholarly journal articles. This lesson includes an exercise to demonstrate how to create a brief literature review, and provides straightforward steps and strategies for developing this type of essay.

Handouts

1. Editorials: Gun Control and Virginia (2 pages)
2. Literature Review Worksheet: Gun Control and Virginia (2 pages)
3. Writing a Literature Review: Some Guidelines (2 pages)
4. Literature Review: Relational Words and Phrases (1 page)

Length of Lesson

Two-session format: two 25-minute sessions

One-session format: one 25-minute session

Variations for Different Disciplines

None

Source

Parts of this mini-lesson were adapted from the UC Santa Cruz University Library website (<http://library.ucsc.edu/help/howto/write-a-literature-review>), the University of North Carolina Writing Center website (http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/literature_review.html), the University of Wisconsin-Madison Writing Center website (<http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/ReviewofLiterature.html>), and the Writing at the University of Toronto website (<http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/specific-types-of-writing/literature-review>). Other parts were written by Brendan O'Malley (WF, 2009-2011) and Corey Frost (WF, 2006-2008).

Approved

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Lesson Instructions

Note: Trying to teach students how to write a literature review in a twenty-five-minute mini-lesson is an impossible task, and the materials that follow reflect this; a writing fellow easily could spend an hour or more going over everything here. It is thus advisable to split this material into two sessions, or if this is not possible, to have the instructor give the students the specified handouts beforehand so that preparation for the exercise can be done before the actual session. Instructions for the two-session and one-session formats follow, as well as summaries for the editorials used in the exercise.

Summaries of the three editorials in Handout I follow:

- 1) Advocates the repeal of the one-per-month gun purchase limit in Virginia since the limit infringes on the rights of law-abiding citizens to buy guns, thus giving criminals an advantage. It claims that one scholarly study shows that the limit does not reduce crime.
- 2) The brother of a victim of the Virginia Tech shooting demands that the “Gun Show Loophole” in Virginia be closed. This loophole allows multiple guns to be purchased at “sportsmen shows” without the usual background checks.
- 3) Argues that the potential repeal of the one-per-month gun law in Virginia will reopen the massive flow of guns purchased in Virginia into the Northeast that existed before the 1993 law was passed.

Instructions for Two-Session Format

First Session

1. Give the instructor Handout I one week before the session so that she/he can distribute it to the students. The students should read Handout I on their own before the session, and should underline or highlight the key sentences that best state each piece’s argument.
2. Open with a discussion of the nature and role of the literature review (3 minutes). A sample script follows:

“A literature review is a specific type of academic essay that synthesizes and evaluates the relevant scholarship on a particular topic, usually one that is fairly narrow in scope. A literature review does not contain any new research, but rather is an overview and critique of work that already has been published. Forms of this kind of essay are used in almost every field across the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities. These essays are like book reviews, but examine a whole group of scholarly journal articles or books rather than just one book. Writing a literature review often serves as a first step before embarking on a research project. Most large-scale research projects—like a doctoral dissertation—incorporate a literature review as a formal component. Overall, writing a literature review will help you obtain a better understanding of a specific area of knowledge, and also give you insight into some of the major concerns and debates within a particular discipline.

Typically, literature reviews are written about scholarly journal articles or books. But in order to demonstrate how this type of essay works, in the exercise

we're about to do we will use newspaper editorials, which are much shorter and less complex.”

[Note: You may want to tailor the above to the particular discipline in consultation with the instructor.]

3. Ask students to take out Handout I, and give students Handout II. Go over the instructions for Handout II, give students seven or eight minutes to fill out the strengths and weaknesses of each piece (short sentences or phrases are fine for the purposes of this exercise), and then check to see if they have completed the lists. Then prompt two or three students to read back what they wrote for the strengths of the first piece and list them on the board (“Does anyone have anything different?” is a good way to elicit more answers after the first few). Put about five or six “strengths” on the board and have the students reach a consensus about the three best ones. Repeat this pattern for the “weaknesses” of the first article, then repeat the whole pattern for the second and third. Tell students to record the best choices in their notebooks for later reference. (15 minutes)
4. Give students Handout III, and briefly go over the instructions. If time permits, ask one or two students to tell you how they might answer the questions on Handout III verbally. Then tell students to complete Handout III at home before the next session. (2-3 mins.)

Second Session

1. Ask students to take out the completed Handout III. Have a few students tell the class how each answered question #1. Have the class as a whole determine which answer seems most effective and write that one on the board. Repeat this process for questions #2 and #3. (6 mins.)
2. Taking the best answers into account, ask students to write a thesis statement for a literature review essay in their own notebooks. (6 mins.)
3. Call on two or three students to read their thesis statements aloud. Have the students come to a consensus on the one that they think is most effective. Collectively, have the students create an outline on the board for a literature review essay based on the thesis statement that they chose as a group. (10 mins.)
4. Give students Handouts IV and V and go over them briefly if time permits. (3 mins.)

Instructions for One-Session Format

1. Give the instructor Handouts I, II, and III two weeks before the session so that she/he can distribute them to the students. The students should read Handout I and complete Handouts II and III on their own in advance of the session.
2. Open with a discussion of the nature and role of the literature review (3 minutes). A sample script follows:

“A literature review is a specific type of academic essay that synthesizes and evaluates the relevant scholarship on a particular topic, usually one that is fairly narrow in scope. A literature review does not contain any new research, but rather is an overview and critique of work that already has been published. Forms of this kind of essay are used in almost every field across the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities. These essays are like book reviews, but examine a whole group of scholarly journal articles or books rather than just one book. Writing a literature review often serves as a first step before embarking on a research project. Most large-scale research projects—like a doctoral dissertation—incorporate a literature review as a formal component. Overall, writing a literature review will help you obtain a better understanding of a specific area of knowledge, and also give you insight into some of the major concerns and debates within a particular discipline.

Typically, literature reviews are written about scholarly journal articles or books. But in order to demonstrate how this type of essay works, in the exercise we’re about to do we will use newspaper editorials, which are much shorter and less complex.”

3. Divide the students into three groups. Assign each group one of the editorials from Handout I. Have each group come to a consensus about three “strengths” and “weaknesses” for its assigned piece. Write the “strengths” and “weaknesses” for each piece determined by each group up on the board. (6 mins.)
4. Ask students to take out their completed Handout III. Have the first group come to a consensus for the best answer among them for question #1, the second group for questions #2, and the third group for question 3. Write the best answers on the board. (6 mins.)
5. With the class as a whole, try to formulate a thesis statement for a literature review essay based on the information up on the board. Give students Handouts IV and V, and if time permits, discuss how to formulate an outline for a paper based on the thesis statement that the class formulated, referring to Handouts IV and V as appropriate. (6 mins.)

Handout I

EDITORIALS: GUN CONTROL AND VIRGINIA

Editorial #1: *Getting Rid of Gun Control*

Virginia finally is poised to repeal its unusual law that prohibits law-abiding citizens from buying more than one gun per month. It's about time, because the red tape has not had the desired effect in lowering crime. There is no academic research by criminologists or economists that shows that one-gun-a-month regulations reduce crime in either the states that pass them or their neighbors. The laws have merely inconvenienced honest Americans who want to buy guns.

Besides Virginia, only Maryland, California and New Jersey still have these laws. South Carolina was the first state to adopt the restrictions in 1976 but repealed the limit in 2004. New Jersey has had the law on the books for less than two months now.

Contrary to the nanny-state notion that gun control is good, gun limitations are actually harmful. The book "The Bias Against Guns" shows that one-gun-a-month rules significantly reduce the number of gun shows, because they reduce the number of sales that can occur. For the same reason, it's likely the regulation reduces the number of gun dealers. The reduction in legal sources to buy guns can raise the cost of law-abiding citizens buying guns relative to criminals, and thus disarm good people relative to criminals. The book "More Guns, Less Crime," the only peer-reviewed research on one-gun-a-month restrictions, from the University of Chicago Press, shows the laws either have no effect or a detrimental effect on violent crime.

The Brady Campaign claims that Virginia's one-gun-a-month law reduced the number of crime guns traced to Virginia dealers, but it provides no link to crime rates, which is ultimately the bottom line. If people around the nation's capital should understand anything, it is how hard it is to keep criminals from getting guns. The District of Columbia banned handguns entirely, and murder rates still soared. Criminals got a hold of guns despite the law, because by nature they don't care about breaking laws, and they can't buy guns legally anyway. The question ought to be focused on whom these laws prevent from getting guns, and the evidence is that law-abiding citizens are the ones who are stopped. One-gun-a-month rules are similar to gun bans and waiting periods, which tend to disarm victims relative to criminals, and therefore, increase crime. If possible, it's a good idea to keep guns from criminals, but laws that make it more difficult for law-abiding citizens to get guns relative to criminals cause more harm than good. In the case of the right to keep and bear arms, safety and freedom go together.

—*Washington Times*, February 19, 2010

Editorial #2: *Firearms Still Easily Available*

Three years have passed since the massacre at Virginia Tech that took the lives of 32 innocent people, including my sister Reema. I look back over the past 1,097 days since my sister died and wonder how it is still legal for criminals and people with serious mental illness to buy guns without passing a background check.

Reema was killed because of a gap in Virginia's gun background check system that allowed a mentally ill man to buy weapons. Even though a court determined that he was mentally ill and therefore prohibited from purchasing and possessing guns, his record of mental illness was not in the background check system.

Thankfully, following recommendations of the Virginia Tech review panel, action was taken at the state and federal level to help get missing mental health and criminal records into the background check system. The number of mental health records submitted to the federal instant background check system has tripled from 298,571 (as of Dec. 31, 2006) prior to the Virginia Tech massacre to 932,559 (as of March 31, 2010).

Unfortunately, the problem doesn't end there. Criminals, the mentally ill, and even terrorists are still able to purchase firearms from gun shows with no background check whatsoever. Federal law requires every licensed gun dealer to conduct criminal background checks on all purchasers. But dealers without licenses are selling guns at gun shows without these checks.

According to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF), 30 percent of guns in federal illegal trafficking investigations are connected to gun shows. This Gun Show Loophole is exploited by criminals and those who know they cannot pass a background check.

Last May, I went to a gun show in Richmond to see for myself. I bought 10 guns in less than one hour. No background check. No identification. No questions asked. It was as easy as buying a bag of chips at a grocery store; simple cash and carry. Luckily, I'm not a criminal.

What's clear is that anyone, even criminals, can go to any gun show and buy an unlimited number of guns, without undergoing a background check. It's hard to believe, but it's true. And there's nothing to stop them from doing it over and over again.

Three years have passed and the Gun Show Loophole still remains intact. The solution is simple: Congress should pass legislation to require background checks for all sales at gun shows. Sen. Jim Webb and Sen. Mark Warner, the families of the Virginia Tech victims and survivors are counting on your leadership. Closing the loophole will not affect the Second Amendment rights of law-abiding gun owners. But it will help ensure that guns do not end up in the hands of people who, because they are a danger to society, have lost the right to own them.

In May 2009 my father and I, and several other Virginia Tech family members, met with Sen. Webb to ask for his support for legislation to close the Gun Show Loophole. What impressed us was how seriously he took the issue and his promise to work in Congress to fix this problem.

It has been almost 11 months since that meeting, three years since the tragedy at Virginia Tech, and no action has been taken to move this lifesaving legislation forward. I hope that all Virginians will stand with the families of the Virginia Tech victims and survivors in calling on Sens. Webb and Warner to get behind this effort.

Closing the Gun Show Loophole won't bring my sister Reema back, or any of the other victims of the mass shooting at Virginia Tech. But it would save an untold number of innocent lives. It's been three years. The time to act is now. Sen. Webb and Sen. Warner, what are you waiting for?

—*Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 20, 2010

Editorial #3: *Virginia Handgun Law: Don't Reopen the Pipeline of Guns*

Seventeen years ago, pressured by its neighbors to stem the flow of guns into the Northeast, Virginia enacted a bipartisan bill that limited the purchase of handguns to one every 30 days. Virtually overnight, experts say, the "Iron Pipeline" slowed and the number of guns used in crimes in New Jersey and traced to Virginia fell sharply.

But now a Virginia legislator wants to turn his state back into one of New Jersey's leading arsenals. A bill proposed by L. Scott Lingamfelter, a Republican, has cleared the House of Delegates, with mostly Republican support, and is headed for the state Senate, which is controlled by Democrats. There the bill's chances are uncertain, but if it passes, Gov. Bob McDonnell intends to sign it. Virginia's gun-running days could be back again.

Lingamfelter, a retired Army colonel, insists Virginians' Second Amendment rights are being restricted. The current law "rationally constitutional rights," he says; "It hasn't reduced crime. It has reduced commerce." Lingamfelter says the National Instant Check System, which wasn't around in 1993, can keep felons from purchasing guns. Maybe, but many of the guns that end up in New Jersey are purchased by "straw buyers" — people with valid Virginia drivers licenses who act as purchasing agents for a fee.

New Jersey officials — from U.S. senators to police chiefs — are wondering what Virginia lawmakers are thinking. In a gun-trafficking study of 2008, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives determined that, even with the reduced flow, Virginia still ranked third among outside states providing guns used in New Jersey crimes. Repealing Virginia's firearm law will mean hundreds more guns on New Jersey streets each year, many married to a violent, criminal intent. To argue that the law is an onerous burden on law-abiding gun buyers is silly. Virginians can buy 12 guns a year. How many do they need?

—*Star-Ledger* (Newark, NJ), February 22, 2010

LITERATURE REVIEW WORKSHEET: GUN CONTROL AND VIRGINIA

1) List the strengths and weaknesses of Editorial #1.

STRENGTHS

WEAKNESSES

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____
- 4) _____

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____
- 4) _____

2) Please do the same for Editorial #2.

STRENGTHS

WEAKNESSES

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____
- 4) _____

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____
- 4) _____

3) And please do the same for Editorial #3.

STRENGTHS

WEAKNESSES

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____
- 4) _____

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____
- 4) _____

LITERATURE REVIEW WORKSHEET #2: GUN CONTROL AND VIRGINIA

1) To your mind, which of the three articles was the most persuasive? Why?

2) Which of the three articles was the least persuasive? Why?

3) Are there any important issues regarding gun control that are not covered by these three pieces, but that you would write about if you were addressing this topic?

Writing a Literature Review: Some Guidelines

What Is a Literature Review?

A literature review is a survey of scholarly articles, books, or other sources that pertain to a specific topic, area of research, or theory. The literature review offers brief descriptions, summaries, and critical evaluations of each work, and does so in the form of a well organized essay. Scholars often write literature reviews to provide an overview of the most significant recent literature published on a topic. They also use literature reviews to trace the evolution of certain debates or intellectual problems within a field. Even if a literature review is not a formal part of a research project, students should conduct an informal one so that they know what kind of scholarly work has been done previously on the topic that they have selected.

How Is a Literature Review Different from a Research Paper?

An academic research paper attempts to develop a new argument, and typically has a literature review as one of its parts. In a research paper, the author uses the literature review to show how his or her new insights build upon and depart from existing scholarship. A literature review by itself does not try to make a new argument based on original research, but rather summarizes, synthesizes, and critiques the arguments and ideas of others, and points to gaps in the current literature. Before writing a literature review, a student should look for a model from a relevant journal or ask the instructor to point to a good example.

Picking a Topic

First, the writer needs to pick a topic that she finds compelling and that is relevant to the course. Second, the topic should be relatively narrow so that it does not overwhelm the writer. For example, the literature on the causes of the U.S. Civil War is much too vast for a short review essay. A review of recent scholarship published on the economic impact of secession on the Confederacy is probably narrow enough for a relatively short essay. In most cases, students will need to clear a topic with the instructor before proceeding to make sure that it is a relevant topic of the proper scope.

Finding Relevant Literature

With the advent of electronic databases like JSTOR, Academic Search Complete, Lexis/Nexis, and Project Muse, it has become relatively easy to find relevant and trustworthy sources for a literature review essay. These and many more scholarly databases are available on the Brooklyn College Library website here:

<http://dewey.brooklyn.cuny.edu/resources/?view=databases>

When searching these databases, the writer needs to use keywords or phrases that are as closely associated with the topic as possible. Searching with one or two phrases surrounded by quotation marks (for example, “Civil War” in tandem with “economic impact”) will help to hone in on the most relevant results, as only articles that contain those two specific phrases will be found.

Evaluating the Literature

After students have found a number of articles or books related to a topic, they will evaluate them to determine which ones seem to make the most important contributions to the scholarship on the topic. For undergraduate students, this step is often difficult since they are not experts and are just beginning to learn about major themes and debates within a field. Nonetheless, by asking some of the questions below, student writers can make a pretty well educated assessment about whether or not an article contributes something significant to the relevant area of scholarship. In addition, evaluating articles with these questions will be helpful in figuring out how to organize the material later when composing the essay.

Questions to Ask about Individual Articles

- Does the article have a clear thesis statement? Is that thesis supported by a well organized argument that uses convincing evidence?
- What strategies or methodologies does the author use in the article?
- Was the article published in a respected academic journal? (Undergraduates should ask their instructor to identify the leading journals in the field. Databases like JSTOR tend to carry only journals with good scholarly reputations.)
- Is the author someone who seems reliable? Might the author have some sort of agenda or ideological motivation that might affect the way the argument is presented? (A Google search can be useful.)
- How recently was the article published? In rapidly changing fields, research can become dated quickly, so it is generally preferable to use articles published within the past five years or so. (In some cases, the instructor may tell students to use older articles with newer ones to trace how ideas and debates have changed over time.)
- What original contribution does the article make to the discussion about the topic?

Organizing a Literature Review

A successful literature review should have three parts that break down in the following way:

A. INTRODUCTION

1. Defines and identifies the topic and establishes the reason for the literature review.
2. Points to general trends in what has been published about the topic.
3. Explains the criteria used in analyzing and comparing articles.

B. BODY OF THE REVIEW

1. Groups articles into thematic clusters, or subtopics. Clusters may be grouped together chronologically, thematically, or methodologically (see below for more on this).
2. Proceeds in a logical order from cluster to cluster.
3. Emphasizes the main findings or arguments of the articles in the student's own words. Keeps quotations from sources to an absolute minimum.

B. CONCLUSION

1. Summarizes the major themes that emerged in the review and identifies areas of controversy in the literature.
2. Pinpoints strengths and weaknesses among the articles (innovative methods used, gaps in research, problems with theoretical frameworks, etc.).
3. Concludes by formulating questions that need further research within the topic, and provides some insight into the relationship between that topic and the larger field of study or discipline.

Creating Clusters or Subtopics

Chronological Groupings: With this method, you can group material according to when it was published or the time period the material addresses. For example, for a literature review about post-1965 immigration to New York City, you might group the material that addresses the 1960s and 1970s in one section, and the 1980s and 1990s in another. This method works well in essays that trace the evolution of a certain theme or idea over time, but can be less coherent in other contexts.

Thematic Groupings: In this approach, sections might be organized around particular subthemes within the essay's topic. For the post-1965 immigration essay mentioned above, you might organize separate sections on literature dealing with different ethnic groups: Asians, Eastern Europeans, Mexicans, etc.

Methodological Groupings: A methodological approach differs from the two above in that it does not focus so much on the content, but the "methods" of the researcher or writer. In the above example, authors who interpret demographic data from the census might be put in one group, while another group might be formed around work that uses ethnographic approaches.

Literature Review: Relational Words and Phrases

The entire point of writing a literature review is to synthesize, or write about the relationships between, the articles you're using, defining the connection between them and explaining how they come together to represent a body of knowledge on a subject. The following words and phrases are useful because they express specific types of relationships between ideas.

on one hand	
on the other hand	
contrary to	rejects
in line with	confuses
parallel to	reinforces
related to	a similar focus/approach/tone
linked to	a slightly different focus/approach/tone
responds to	a broader scope
elaborates	a narrower scope
undermines	more specific / more general
explores / investigates	in the same vein
contributes to the research on	in a different sphere
enters the debate	adapts
re-emphasizes the categories	misses
in agreement with	supports
in opposition to	revisits the same subject
in confirmation of	revolutionizes the field of
in response to	bypasses the debate
in reaction against	breaks out of the paradigm
in contrast to	goes beyond
influenced by	misinterprets
	criticizes