Dealing with Secondary Literature

Adapted from Machi and McEvoy, *The Literature Review: A 6 Step Process* (2009)

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Contents

Introduction: Dealing with Secondary Literature

> Imagine that you are doing a woodworking project, perhaps making a table. You have designed it and cut out some of the parts. Fortunately, you needn't make all the parts yourself. Some are standard sizes and shapes – lengths of two by four, for instance – available in any lumberyard. Some have already been designed and made by other people – drawer pulls and turned legs. All you have to do is fit them into places you left for them, knowing that they were available. This is the best way to use the literature. You want to make an argument, instead of a table. You have created some of the argument yourself, perhaps on the basis of new data or information you have collected. But you needn't invent the whole thing. Other people have worked on your problem or problems related to it and have made some of the pieces you need. You just have to fit them where they belong.
>
> (Becker 1983, pp. 141-42)

Managing the range of secondary (or critical) resources in a given field is one of the most challenging and frustrating tasks faced by PhD writers. Researchers must learn a range of skills to effectively marshal and organise their research as soon as possible. This short booklet is designed to help you do so.

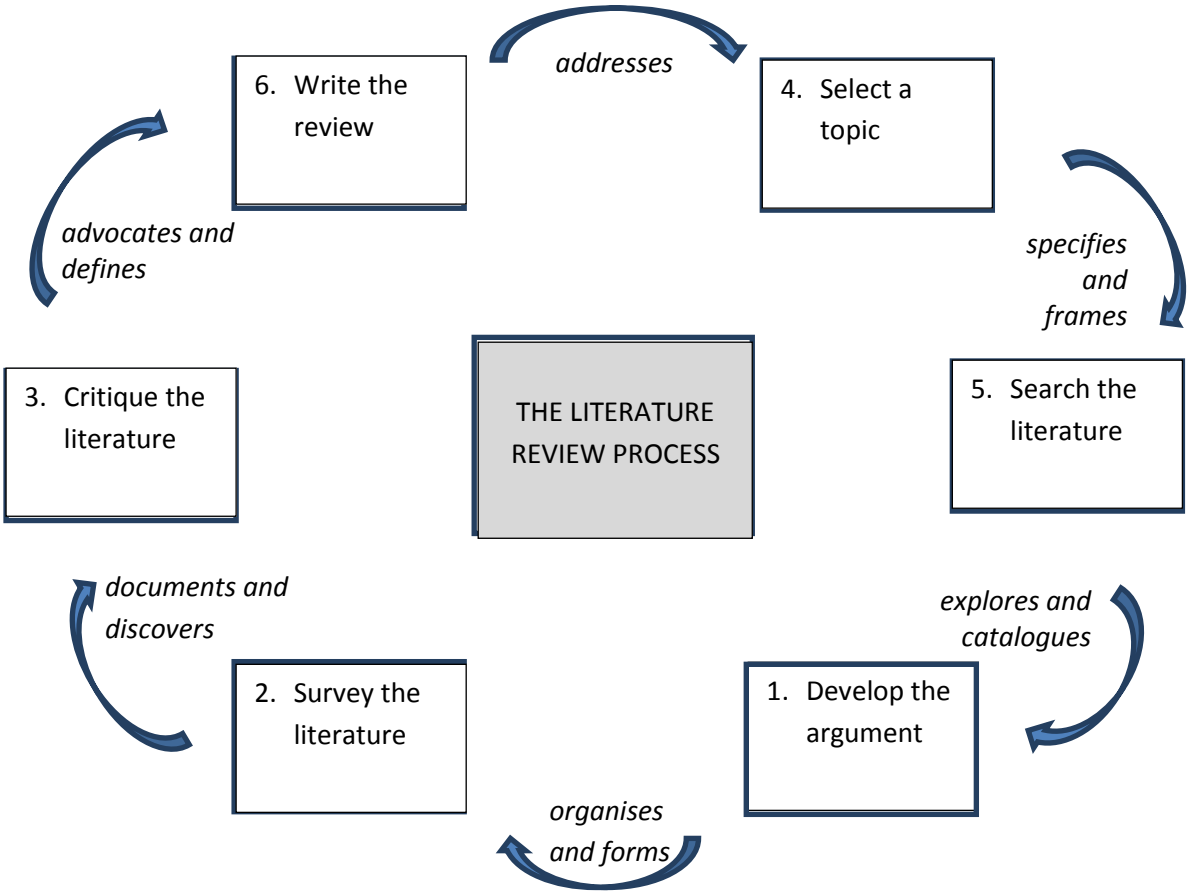
Defining 'Secondary Literature'

Secondary literature refers to any form of academic writing about a topic that is not considered to be primary research. Central to the idea of secondary research are terms such as review, synthesis, summary, critique, and analysis. In some subjects, according to the traditional approach, readers expect a separate 'literature review' at the outset of the project – one that will extract a range of information from existing research to build the case for the thesis argument; in others, however, the guidelines around analysing secondary literature are far less clear. Talk to your supervisor(s), colleagues in your department, and peers about what you are expected to produce. If the rules aren't hard and fast, you must start to consider the options open to your project at an early stage.

The Literature Review: A Six Step Process

The way in which we (as researchers) deal with extant secondary material is very different from our analyses of primary research findings. Regardless of discipline, learning to manage the bank of published works relevant to your field of study is a demanding but crucial process. As such, we must look for research and writing strategies for managing this material. By breaking this process down into **six steps**, we can begin to unpack some important aspects of secondary literature review and analysis.

This workbook is structured around Machi and McEvoy's (2009) model:



Step 1. Select a Topic

The fact that you are reading this booklet suggests that you have already selected a general research topic and that you are (at least) ready to begin your secondary research. Agreeing an initial plan of action with your supervisor is a helpful way to begin the secondary literature review process; don't be afraid to ask for guidance at this stage – you aren't expected to be an expert (yet). Your starting point for research will change (often quite substantially) as your knowledge of the field progresses – this is an expected outcome that reflects your ability to refine and synthesise your research as your understanding of the field grows. But before it is possible to get to this stage, you must begin to identify the key voices in your research field. Complete the below exercises and review your answers with reference to the information on the following page.

Write a list of key terms that relate closely to your research project (e.g. 'Irish economy', 'recession', 'socio-economic mobility', 'rural areas', etc.)

Try to use these terms to generate a concise prototype for your research statement (e.g. "This project *explores* the effects of the Irish economic recession upon socio-economic mobility in rural areas")

Talk to your supervisor (or someone else who is knowledgeable of the field) and list the key names and/or works associated with this subject:

1 (a) Specificity

The topic for most research projects will change substantially over time. As you read (and write) you will refine your topic to much more focused form. If we consider the following research statement: "I am interested in why students are not achieving", it is clear that the topic must be refined to become a feasible topic for research. Think about ways in which you can narrow the specificity of your project. Are there particular contexts, timeframes, determiners, and/or domains that you can use to focus your study? Keep reverting back to your thesis statement with an eye toward specificity. Begin by listing some options that you *could* explore to make your project more specific:

i.e. for the project centred upon "Irish economic recession upon socio-economic mobility in rural areas": Timeframe? Research sample(s)? Fieldwork location(s)? etc.

(b) Focus

Ask, and keep asking yourself:

- How complicated is my thesis statement?
- Have I chosen one subject to study - one that can be examined clearly?
- Do I have (or can I set) clear boundaries? And can I justify them?
- Have I chosen a subject that I can clearly describe and singularly define?
- Am I focusing on one subject of study?

(c) Perspective: Choosing Your Vantage Point

- What academic fields best lend themselves to your subject and perspective for research?
- What are the specific knowledge areas of this academic field that will best help in exploring and defining the research subject?
- What knowledge and competency do you have in this field?
- What further knowledge will you have to acquire to have a solid foundation to address this interest?

Step 2. Search the Literature: Search Tasks and Tools

A fundamental principle of any research project is that you cannot write what you do not know. In the very early stages, therefore, it is often advisable to resist the urge to start writing (at least) until you have conducted a literature search. Instead, direct your time and energy on the search, asking for advice from your supervisor, colleagues, peers, and/or librarians. Even at this early stage it is important to be realistic about your research parameters. Identifying these parameters will help you to search with speed, caution, and with an 'open' and 'fluid' attitude towards your research statement.

(a) Discover the Literature to Review

Set about gathering information that addresses the key ideas contained in your topic statement.

Ask (and keep asking) yourself:

- What is the subject of my inquiry?
- Which keywords do I need to prioritise?
- What literature must I include that will tell me about the subject?
- How am I conducting my searches?

(b) Conduct a Literature Search

So you know what you are looking for, and why you are looking for it. How do you methodically search the literature?

- ***Scan*** the literature
- ***Skim*** potential works for content
- ***Map*** the suitable works for inclusion

Scanning

The key terms and core ideas of your preliminary research statement define the search. From your initial output scan the library materials. Imagine that you are collecting puzzle pieces, pieces that you'll analyse and assort later. Immediately identify 'useful' resources and set unclear ones aside. Use library and online catalogues, subject encyclopaedias, periodical indexes, and abstracts to maximise your search yield.

Skimming

Once identified, skim-read possible works to identify important ideas and their specific contribution(s) to your research field. Be strategic by using indexes and contents pages to quicken your reading. Prioritise abstracts and introductions for overviews and 'thesis statements' from your texts. If necessary, quickly read sections, chapters, subchapters to decide what 'fits' with your research statement. Depending on the type of text, you can utilise a variety of strategies:

For **books**, read the following in descending order:

- The contents page
- First and last paragraphs of introduction
- Any descriptive headings in introduction
- First and last paragraphs of conclusion

If you're interested in the topic covered by a particular chapter, use the same technique:

- First paragraph
- Last paragraph
- Any figures or graphs
- Headings

To take it further (if you want to spend more time on a chapter or section):

- First sentence of each paragraph

For **journal articles**, read the following in descending order:

- Abstract
- Any figures or graphs
- Introductory paragraph
- Final paragraph
- Headings

To take it further:

- First sentence of each paragraph

Mapping

Mapping the skimmed output is essentially a task of organisation. Examine the material to decide its potential place in the 'puzzle'. How could these data help you to refine/elucidate the key words of your research statement? A good way to start mapping is to document where the literature might 'fit' in your development of the research statement.

Step 3. Develop the Argument

(a) Building the Case for the Literature Review

Now you must compile and arrange sets of facts in a logical order that will help you prove that your research statement is valid. Use the information you have analysed to construct and underpin your thesis argument. Work through this material with your conclusions in mind – be very clear at every stage about how your research statement is contributing to the field.

The literature review argument uses two argument types to make its case:

- **Argument of Discovery**: Descriptive account – discusses and explains what is known about the subject.

- **Argument of Advocacy**: Analytical account – critically analyses and critiques the knowledge gained through synthesis of research to answer the research question. The answer to this argument is the thesis statement.

(b) Evaluate the Basic Parts of an Argument

The following questions provide and effective guide for efficiently checking the strength of an argument:

- What is the stated conclusion?
- What is the evidence that supports the conclusion?
- Is the evidence convincing?
- What evidence has been overlooked/neglected?
- Do the conclusion build logically from this evidence?
- How else could this study/these conclusions be completed/drawn?

Step 4. Survey the Literature: Building Your Argument of Discovery

(a) Assemble the Collected Data

- Catalogue and document major works of recognised importance
- Build a list of authors and catalogue citations
- Review the quality and strength of the information
- Document core ideas against your research statement

(b) Synthesise the Information

- Arrange and categorise major works into categories – by author, key descriptor, theme, chronology, theory, etc.
- Organise core maps and outlines according to theme patterns
- Expand tentative author maps, theory maps, bibliographic entry abstracts, and notes to build prevailing theories, principles, etc. in light of your research statement
- Try to build simple claims. Set aside the complexities of the arguments to catalogue overarching claims against your research statement

(c) Analyse the Patterns of the Data

- Examine core maps to formulate an arguments scheme and reasoning pattern – use these to determine 'what is known' about the topic
- Create a storyline: mind-map and outline a discovery argument. Begin to build your complex arguments and major claims through simple, accessible assertions
- Compose an exploratory document on the current state of knowledge about the research subject – tell the story

(d) Evaluate Your Argument

- What is the complex argument of your thesis?
- What premises make up the complex argument?
- How do the premises support and undergird your conclusion?
- What is the logical drive of the argument?
- Is the complex argument logical? Does it draw logically from your research findings?
- Does anything seem out of place?

Step 5. Critique the Literature: Interpreting Research

Now you should be ready to begin critiquing the literature against your thesis statement. There are important strategies to employ as you start drawing conclusive analyses from the literary context of your research project. With attention to implicative reasoning (i.e. what implications you can draw, and justify, from existing research) and argument patterns you can continue building towards writing up your 'literature critique'.

(a) Implicative Reasoning

Implicative reasoning is a logical interpretation of evidence to produce prepositions that signal a specific conclusion. As part of this process you must

- Match your outcomes to implicative conditions – do conditions of your findings convincingly *implicate* your conclusions?
- Be clear about the logic that underpins these implications
- Show your analytical rationale
- Express linked arguments: "If **X** is what we know about the research subject, then the following implications can be concluded..."
- Always refer back to the research question and statement

(b) Argument Patterns

- Build your argument for the literature critique by asking the following question: "If the premises stating what is known about the research question is **X**, then what can I conclude?"
- Identify connections between known premises and the research question
- How do the premises answer the question?
- What gaps do they leave?
- How effectively does your research statement meet the needs you have identified?

Step 6. Write the Review: Write, Audit, Edit

(a) Exploratory Writing

Writing about the subject can (and will) help you to refine the previous stages. Begin writing an exploratory composition to develop and assess your knowledge of the subject. This can provide you with an account of how well you understand and can orchestrate the contents of the work – evaluate your writing for strength and logical drive. This is a very effective method of exposing any gaps in your research.

(b) Outline

After your exploratory exercises, compose a formal outline of the work. In this outline you should maintain sensitivity of the logical order. Try numbering your points / paragraphs in order. Once you have done this, ask yourself: does point 4 build logically upon point 5? Does my conclusion address each of the points sequentially? When you are satisfied with the order evaluate your ability to justify the overarching argument from your list of points. Always remember to relate to the research statement at every stage.

(c) Preliminary Draft

You should now be ready to complete a detailed draft of the literature review. Pay attention to linkage, phrasing, tense, referencing, and presentation consistency. Assimilate, arrange, and form your ideas into a written account that tells the story of your chosen research field. When you are linking sentences and paragraphs always use logic as your guiding force.

(d) Structure

As with virtually any piece of academic writing, we must structure our literature critiques according to the introduction, body, and conclusion formula. We can break these components down further like so:

Introduction: Begin with an *introductory statement*. Use this to draw the reader in and elicit a 'reader-response' that might entice them to continue reading. This should be followed by your *study topic statement*: define the subject of research, identify key areas within this research, and clearly articulate the key ideas relating to the topic. Following this,

briefly outline the study's setting with a *context statement*. This should provide your reader with all they need to know before engaging with your research findings. End your introduction section with a *significance statement* – explain (as concisely as possible) the 'value' of this research field (and by extension: your project).

Body: The body section of your review presents the case for your research project by mapping out the literary field. You can approach this part in two sections: the *discovery* and *advocacy* arguments. The former states what is known about the topic of study, giving background to the research subject and naming its chief protagonists. In this section you are expected to describe the subject through an account of the major research projects in the field. In contrast, the *advocacy argument* must be analytical. In this section (/these sections) you are expected to develop your thesis statement through your analysis of the literature. You must report the products of your literature survey and critique, identifying gaps and/or weaknesses in the field. You then build towards a conclusion that justifies the research project that you have elected to undertake.

Conclusion: Begin the conclusion by restating your thesis argument. Next, revise the key points of discussion from the *advocacy* argument sequentially. This reaffirms the logic of your literature critique argument and reminds your reader of the key points justifying your conclusion. Relate these points firmly to your thesis statement: build the case for your research. You should try to do all of this without returning to the specific authors (unless absolutely necessary). Finally, state the impact of the thesis: how does your research project solve the problems of the study?

(e) Drafting

Drafting and redrafting the work into a finished form is essential in completing a finished review that accurately and adequately communicates the subject ideas to others. Ask yourself:

- Does the composition tell the story that I intended?
- Have I told the right story?
- Is the story told being heard? (Remember: you are now writing for an audience!)

(f) Editing

The focus of a first draft is to produce a clear, written communication and to gain audience understanding. Build the preliminary draft into a first draft by asking the following:

- Do syntax, voice, and paragraphing align?
- Is grammar correct?
- Is the point of view consistent?
- Are verb tenses consistent (past or present)?
- Does the style read fluidly?

Bibliography and Selected Further Reading

Becker, Howard S. (1986) *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article* (U Chicago P).

Evans, David and Paul Gruba (2002) *How to Write a Better Thesis* (Melbourne UP).

Machi, Lawrence A. and Brenda T. McEvoy (2009) *The Literature Review: A 6 Step Process* (Corwin).