



# Teaching the Literature Review: A Practical Approach for College Instructors

## ABSTRACT

Instructors across the disciplines require their students to write literature reviews. Although numerous sources describe the literature review process, instructors and students face difficulty when approaching the structure of a literature review. This paper presents a straightforward, efficient approach for teaching students how to write a literature review. Developed over the course of three years at a university writing center, this lesson received substantial support from students across the disciplines. This paper reflects on one group of students' experiences while writing literature reviews in a political science course, showing that students demonstrated a sense of confidence and direction after the lesson. University professors, writing center staff, and content-discipline instructors in higher education classrooms can alleviate their students' anxiety about literature reviews by using this lesson in their classrooms.

## KEYWORDS

literature review, college writing, college teaching, disciplinary writing, writing center

**Tutor:** *What does the term "literature review" mean to you?*

**Jessica:** *God, I don't know. I don't have sense of structure. It's a synthesis and summary, I know that.*

**Dylan:** *You explain and describe the recent theories and something like that. I don't know, man. I guess I talk about specific details and things. But how far do I go? I mean, that could take forever.*

I worked at the writing center of a major university for several years. Students who sought my assistance often requested help on how to write a literature review that had been assigned by one of their instructors. At the beginning of our one-on-one, 50-minute session, I often asked the student to define a *literature review*. The students' [pseudonyms] responses above are typical of what I heard—confusion and uncertainty. Therefore, my task as a writing tutor was first to demystify student misunderstandings toward the literature review and second to teach them to write a coherent, thoughtful review.

Literature reviews are a common writing assignment in four-year university courses, junior college courses, and graduate education (Ridley, 2008); however, the process



of writing in college (Gruenbaum, 2012), and particularly writing literature reviews, can be intimidating and confusing for students (Ridley, 2008; Feak & Swales, 2009). Even though the literature review is a hallmark of scholarly research, students may have difficulty even defining the term. Furthermore, students find it challenging to synthesize works in a literature review and thus are unable to write a coherent review. Above all, my tutoring experience has shown that students often have difficulty with the structure of the literature review; they typically write a series of unrelated paragraphs, each of which summarizes one of the works reviewed rather than an integrative analysis of all the sources.

It is the purpose of this article to present an approach I developed for teaching students how to write literature reviews: the Literature Review Lesson (LRL). I have found the LRL to be a practical and efficient approach because it emphasizes the structure of a literature review—the nemesis of novice writers—and how students can use the disciplinary literacy (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008) within their particular content areas (e.g., history, biology, literature, psychology) as they write their reviews. Focusing on the structure of a literature review, however, does not mean ignoring content; rather, the LRL seeks to create a flexible template that assists students' use of content (Birkenstein & Graff, 2008). I developed the LRL over three years as I worked with students. I created a prototype lesson, implemented it, and evaluated it several times coinciding with methods that make the tutoring session effective (Bloom, 1984; Fullmer, 2012; Grogan, 2011; Reinheimer & McKenzie, 2011; Wood & Wood, 1996). Through these iterations, I found the LRL to be increasingly effective.

In the following sections, I review and reflect (Schon, 1984) on the research, theory, and guidebooks on writing literature reviews, indicating gaps that may explain student confusion. After describing my methodology, I present the LRL in full. I also provide comments my students made during tutoring sessions about literature reviews before, during, and after I taught the LRL (Seidman, 2006), gathered in accordance with IRB approval. I conclude by discussing how the LRL can be adapted to the classroom setting.

## RESEARCH AND THEORY ON WRITING LITERATURE REVIEWS

### Definition and structure

Literature review is defined in many ways. Some writers have defined literature review by its process (Riley, 1997), order (Machi & McEvoy, 2009), or categories, (Zorn & Campbell, 2006). Others view it as a combination of analysis, synthesis, and summary (Hart, 1998). Thus, college writers and instructors may find the multiple definitions confusing. During one of the tutoring sessions, Jessica echoed the confusion, stating, "I don't know. I'm just so lost. I thought it was something not like a summary, but I don't know what I'm doing." Rachel, another tutee, had difficulty finding a definition, saying, "I googled 'literature review,' in hopes of figuring out what it is, but I didn't find anything helpful. It all used the same words." In this paper, I define a *literature review* as a thematic synthesis of sources used to provide readers with an up-to-date summary of theoretical and empirical findings on a particular topic.

There is also a lack of consensus regarding the structure of a literature review (Zorn & Campbell, 2006). Galvan (1999) encouraged students to organize their initial out-

line topically, whereas other authors emphasized the importance of themes (Rocco & Hatcher, 2011). Pan (2008) suggested that some literature reviews may require multiple organizational themes. In the tutoring session, it is the structure, not the content, that typically seems to confuse students. When discussing structure, several students seemed desperate, responding with “oh, my God. I have a real sense of hopelessness” and “I’m just so lost. . . I don’t know what I’m doing.” Billy and Wendy admitted that their approaches would be improvised: “I figured I’d just wing it” and “my attempt would be a total shot-in-the-dark.” Many scholars recommend that themes become headings in the paper to provide writers with a structure and readers with organizational cues (Galvan, 1999; Pan, 2008; Ridley, 2008). Experience with the LRL shows that creating theme-based subheadings helps the inexperienced writer from straying off topic without stifling student originality in the review.

Students often conceive of literature reviews as a process of summarizing, rather than a process of analysis and synthesis, leading writers to a single-author-per-paragraph structure (Hart, 1998) rather than organizing the literature under specific categories or themes (Galvan, 1999). Prior to the LRL, many tutees planned to structure their reviews by author, saying, “Each paragraph would be, like, a single source. So if I had five sources, I’d have five paragraphs.” Similar responses indicated that students felt far more comfortable summarizing sources by paragraph rather than synthesizing them with organizational cues.

### Resources and approaches for writing literature reviews

There are many literature review guidebooks, but they tend to focus on the process leading up to writing the review, not the writing itself. For example, some guidebook authors discuss methods of collecting and organizing sources (Garrard, 2011; Hart, 1998). Others suggest that writers prepare visual maps to organize sources into coherent groups (Feak & Swales, 2009; Machi & McEvoy, 2009; Pan, 2008; Rocco & Hatcher, 2011). Some literature review guides offer at least a general introduction to the structure (e.g., Hart, 1998; Rocco & Hatcher, 2011), but the descriptions are minimal. In sum, guidebooks may help a student identify and organize materials for a review, but few help students to actually write a review.

Only a few authors have addressed how to teach students to write literature reviews. Poe (1990) suggested that college instructors have students (a) write abstracts for non-technical essays; (b) write abstracts for more technical, peer-reviewed articles; and (c) compose an abstract for two compare-and-contrast essays. Melles (2005) recommended that students focus on the most important issues in each article in fewer words with each attempt. Similarly, Zorn and Campbell (2006) suggested that instructors provide students abstracts from four research articles to summarize for a specific audience. The preceding recommendations may provide students a brief introduction to what a literature review is, but they are not likely to prepare students to write a multi-sourced literature review.

In summary, there was a lack of consensus on the definition and structure of literature reviews, and resources for writing literature reviews rarely discussed the structure of the review. In the absence of useful information for instructors, I developed the LRL and modified it on the basis of my reflections and feedback from students to whom I taught the lesson in my university writing center.

## METHODS

### Design and research question

This research used a qualitative design (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009) to answer the overarching research question: What are undergraduate students' perceptions of what a literature review is and how to write one, both before and after experiencing the LRL? A qualitative design approaches data inductively and comparatively in hopes of finding themes or categories (Merriam, 2009). To pursue the research question, I conducted an interview study (Seidman, 2006) in which students were interviewed before and after the LRL in the tutoring session.

### Participants and setting

The participants in this study were 14 undergraduate students in a junior-level political science course who were required to write a literature review. The political science course was designated writing-intensive (WI) by the university's Campus Writing Program. WI designation required the course to assign at least 20 written pages, eight of which needed revision.

Nearly all of the participants (78.5%) were recently-declared political science majors, though some participants were undeclared (21.5%). All of the students noted that this assignment was the first assignment in which they were asked to write a discipline-specific literature review. All of the participants had a previous WI course at the sophomore-level, though few of the previous WI courses were in political science.

Students signed up for 50 minute, one-on-one tutoring sessions in which to discuss their assigned literature reviews. The tutoring session was not connected to the political science course; that is, I did not grade student papers or coordinate with the teaching faculty member during the study. All students were protected by the writing center's policy of student anonymity with regard to their course instructors. As a result, students were encouraged to speak and think freely during the session without fear of judgment.

### Data collection

#### *Interviews*

The primary data used in this study were semi-structured interviews (Mason, 2002) of all 14 participants. Prior to the lesson, I interviewed students individually about what their perceptions of a "literature review" entailed and how they would go about writing a literature review. Then, after the LRL, I interviewed students again to determine if their understandings of a literature review had changed and to learn of their reactions to the LRL. One year later, four students responded to a follow up email in which I inquired about whether or not the LRL had an impact on their political science course literature review assignment and whether the lesson promoted their writing in other academic contexts. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

#### *Other student feedback*

In addition to participant interviews, I took note of other feedback from students outside of the political science course. Because the LRL can be adapted to suit any number of disciplines, I gave the LRL to over 75 undergraduate students in various WI courses.

Feedback is a major portion of the tutoring session, so I took note of general feedback I received from students after the tutoring session in a research notebook.

### *Faculty feedback*

I have presented the LRL 12 times to university faculty through workshops and teaching conferences and have heard back from faculty who have used versions of the LRL in their classrooms. I noted any feedback from faculty in my research notebook.

### **Data analysis**

Data analysis occurred in three phases. In accordance with a qualitative design, I approached the data inductively as themes began to emerge through a constant-comparison methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In Phase I, I read through each of the pre-lesson and post-lesson interview transcripts, applying open codes to each and began to develop potential axial codes. In Phase II, I reread the transcripts several times and refined those axial codes. In Phase III, I sought supporting and any contradicting evidence from faculty and other student feedback on the LRL in order to gain a richer understanding of the student interviews.

## PRE-LESSON INTERVIEW

In this section, I present findings from the interview prior to students receiving the LRL. In the next section, I present the LRL in full. Following the LRL, I present findings from the post-lesson interviews.

### **Students had difficulty defining “literature review”**

I first asked students, “Based off of what you have already learned, how would you define the ‘literature review’?” Students who felt comfortable enough to attempt their own definition made general statements, similar to literature review guidebooks. Doug knew that a literature review is “not just a summary, not just for reviewing for sure,” but he was unable to define it entirely. Sally and Chad, however, attempted their own definitions:

**Sally:** *You summarize the literature and how it contributes. If the arguments are contrasting, then you write how they contrast. So, I guess it’s a summary of everything that’s been said.*

**Chad:** *Well, this is my first one. I’ve never done this. You basically read the basic stuff, the basic points, finding out about the research. Then, essentially synthesizing the paper in a successful manner.*

Some students seemed comfortable with attempting to define the literature review, at least generally. However, some students immediately responded with confusion, admitting their difficulty with the writing process. Many participants showed an understanding of the research process, but their frustration with the writing step was palpable. As noted earlier, Jessica and Dylan lamented their lack of understanding by saying “God, I don’t know. I don’t have a sense of structure. It’s a syntheses and summary” and “You explain and describe recent theories and something like that . . . I guess I talk about spe-

cific details . . . but how far do I go? I mean, that could take forever.” Jeremy, above all the other students, felt confident that he could define the literature review, though he eventually admitted that he was not sure:

**Jeremy:** *It’s reading journal articles and summarizing them. You work for the higher points, the important points, you write them, try and get the bigger topics into some sort of bullet-points, I guess. But not really bullet-points. You have to write it out. Yeah, I’m not sure, actually.*

As demonstrated by these responses, some students became frustrated by their inability to define the literature review. Many seemed aware that their general understanding of the review—the notion of summary and synthesis—was not sufficient for the actual logistics of writing the paper.

### Students’ plans for writing a literature review

It is understandable to receive general definitions of literature reviews. Asking anyone to concisely define a literature review, especially a writer new to the process, would most likely invite confusion. What struck me, however, was the students’ degree of helplessness when asked the more specific question: “If you were to begin this literature review on your own, what steps would you take?” This question elicited frustration from some students, whereas others hesitantly proposed a plan, coinciding with literature review structures that followed an author-based literature review. For example, Billy was frustrated with the overall structure: “[I’ll] write it and then see what happens. I don’t know how to outline something like this!” Similarly, Wendy was frustrated because she felt she had never learned the basics of writing a review: “I have no idea where to start. I guess I’d try to look at other literature reviews and see if I could find something good to mimic. The problem is I don’t know what’s good or bad.” Charles hesitantly proposed a plan for his review, mentioning an author-based approach:

**Charles:** *First I talked about one [article] that agreed with my idea. Then, I talked about some against. I’m just trying to, you know, organize them around author or something. I’d just kind of talk about as much I could with each article. I don’t want to be graded off for missing something, but I don’t really understand any of it, the statistics and stuff.*

In sum, students did not express significant concerns with the research process. Rather, the majority of the confusions dealt with an inability to clearly structure the writing process once the research had been completed. Many of the students expressed an inability to grasp the axiom “summarize and synthesize,” something often stated but rarely put into practice.

## THE LITERATURE REVIEW LESSON

The following lesson was created to address my students’ confusions. Rather than teaching the notions of summary and synthesis through assignments, I approached them with an explanation of the literature review structure. The lesson contains four steps with accompanying graphics. Although the lesson is not scripted per se, I include some possible instructor wording in each step to show how the complex structure of a literature review—at least as perceived by students—can be presented clearly.

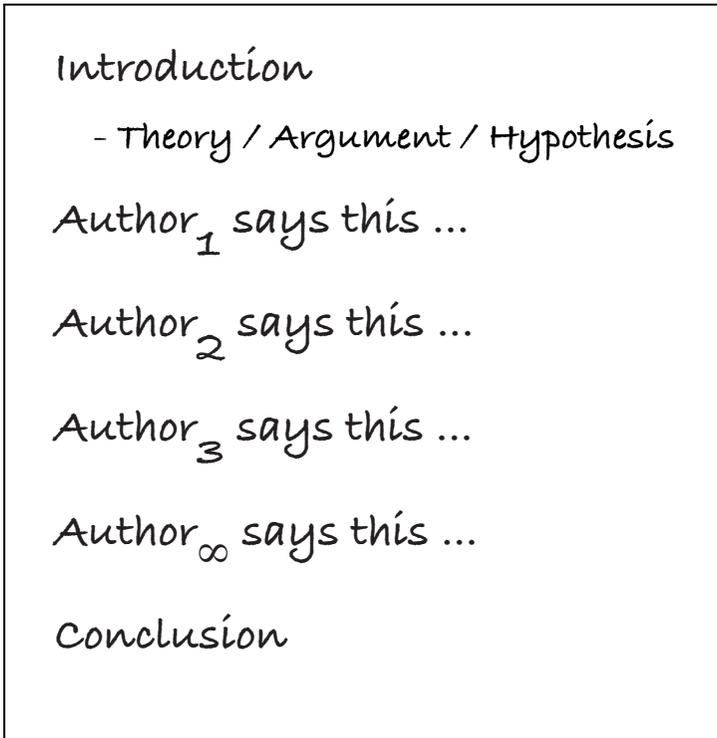


Figure 1. A common student approach to literature reviews

### Step 1: identifying incorrect approaches

Writers new to literature reviews will commonly approach the structure with an author-driven format, based on separate authors rather than a synthesis of those authors. Presumably, students are attempting to follow the notion that literature reviews should “summarize and synthesize.” Students, however, may be unable to do both. “Synthesize” may be an unfamiliar term for some students. Summarizing, however, seems fairly straightforward. The result is a paper whose second paragraph (i.e. after the introduction) begins with “Author 1 argues X.” The third paragraph continues with a topic sentence giving some form of “Author 2 argues X.” Confused students may continue this author-driven format until they run out of sources or reach the page requirement. The final paper, then, is an introduction and conclusion connected by seemingly disconnected sources, giving only summary and no synthesis. No doubt this outline will be familiar to any instructor who teaches literature reviews.

The LRL approaches this problem by prefacing the conversation with a description of the author-based literature review and its lack of synthesis. Focusing the discussion on paragraphs, the instructor writes the incorrect format on the sheet of paper, noting to the students the lack of connection between the sources (See Fig. 1).

**Instructor:** *Most students correctly begin with an introduction, where they might discuss their overall purpose, hypothesis, and so forth. But then they’ll begin the first paragraph with ‘Author 1 says this.’ Then, the next paragraph they’ll say ‘Author 2 says this,’ making each*

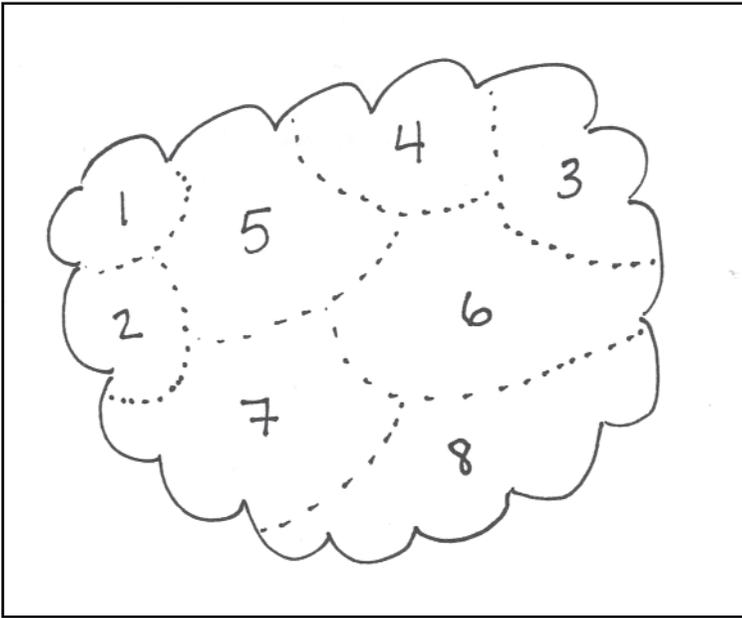


Figure 2. Bubble graphic. This figure provides a visual for synthesizing research.

paragraph about a separate author. Notice that we're not connecting the authors in any way. Students will continue this until they run out of sources. This isn't what I want you to do. Not only does this structure make it difficult to read, it also makes it very difficult for you to write.

After describing the problems with students' common misconceptions of literature reviews, I introduce in Step 2 a more explicit method of understanding literature reviews and the relationship between sources. I have found two visual representations of literature helpful: the bubble and the bucket graphics.

### Step 2: visual representation of theme creation

The bubble graphic (see Fig. 2) gives students a more abstract understanding of what a literature review is trying to do. The figure allows students to see that the process of synthesizing multiple sources is not difficult, just new. As part of the discussion, instructors should also discuss the importance of selecting strong and germane research pieces.

**Instructor:** *This big bubble is a visual representation of all of the relevant literature on your topic, anything and everything, including research on the topic itself or even maybe a theory that is somehow connected. The size of the bubble is determined by your topic. Some broader topics have larger bubbles. Now, assume that as we are reading this material, we begin to see certain patterns, or themes. We start to see that different authors begin discussing the same things. Those things might be a definition of an abstract term, a methodology, an interaction between certain variables, or a disagreement. As the reader, we can begin to categorize our sources by those themes, breaking the bubble into several smaller bubbles, each of which address a topic within the literature review. Notice how this step has you organize the information into more understandable chunks. This is what your literature review is trying to do.*

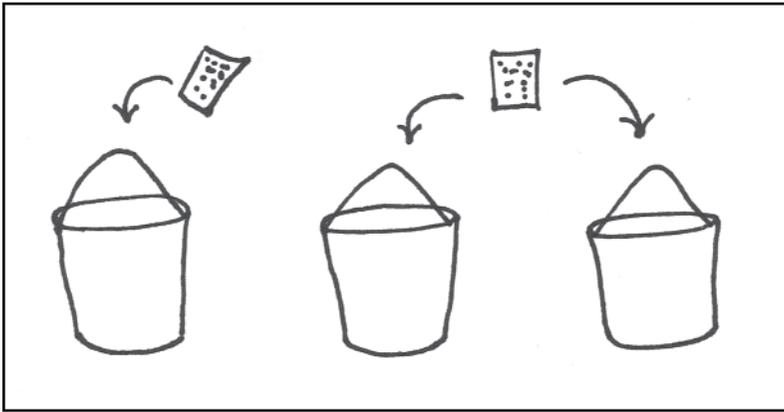


Figure 3. Bucket graphic. This figure offers a more concrete example of synthesizing research.

If students have difficulty understanding the bubble graphic or if instructors would like to use a second example, the bucket metaphor (see Fig. 3) may be useful.

**Instructor:** *Another way to look at this is to imagine a series of buckets, with each bucket representing a cluster or theme we start noticing in the literature. As we collect more sources, we can place them into their respective themed-buckets.*

### Step 3: the theme-based literature review

After exploring visual representations of categorizing literature, students are ready to address the theme-based literature review. The lesson outlines the theme-based literature review by structure only, focusing on how the student might organize paragraphs under specific themes. Following Galvan (1999), Ridley (2008), and Pan (2008), I encourage students to use subheadings in their literature reviews.

**Instructor:** *Now that we have our themes, we can begin to organize our paper in such a way that it is idea-driven, as opposed to author-driven, or a series of unrelated, separate statements, one for each author. In this diagram (see Fig. 4), we create a label for each theme—that is, a bubble or bucket—and make it a subheading. Then, we'll put all of our authors that have discussed this theme underneath that subheading. Now, instead of focusing on a single author and what they said, we now organize the authors by idea. They are not discussed separately. Rather, we will write the literature review like a discussion. Once we have finished one conversation, say Theme 1, we're ready to move on to the next theme, following the same process. Remember, there is no magic number to the themes. That depends on the topic and the number of resources you have.*

### Step 4: an example of discipline-specific literature review

The instructor can now provide a specific example of a literature review. In my tutoring sessions, I present a literature review I composed, entitled: “A Stereotyped Literature: The Conflicting Research Regarding the Compatibility of Islam and Democracy,” (see Fig. 5). Most literature reviews can act as an example. This step only needs to provide a visual representation of the student's final product.

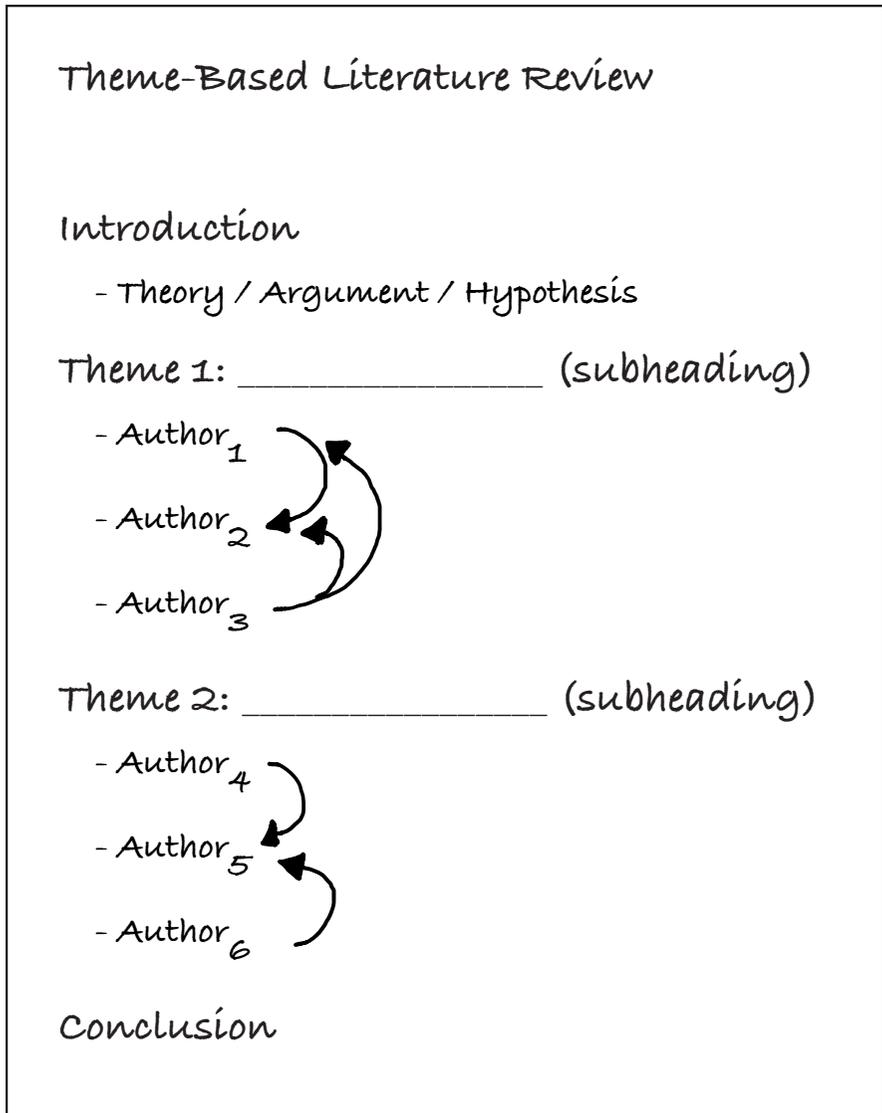


Figure 4. The theme-based literature review outline acts as a model for students writing their first literature reviews.

**Instructor:** Let's focus on the structure, not the content. Notice the use of subheadings in this literature review. Let's identify the themes the author deemed important with this particular topic. The first theme is entitled, "What is Democracy?" Before the author discusses anything regarding democracy, it's important to discuss what we actually mean by "democracy." The author divides his paragraphs by two topics: (1) How does one define democracy; and (2) How has democracy been measured in the past? The next theme, or subheading, "Other Determinants of Democracy," discusses the literature concerning things other than religion that may affect a country's democracy. We now start to see a specific example of how subheadings act

**A Stereotyped Literature:  
The Conflicting Research Regarding the Compatibility of Islam and Democracy**

**What is Democracy?**

The study of democracy and democratization has dominated the field of comparative politics. Scholars have varied in their approach of how to define and measure democracy; however, the most recognized definition of democracy belongs to Schumpeter (1976) which states that democracy "is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote" (269). Dahl's (1971) notion of democracy poses an ideal form of the government, unachievable by today's standards. In sum, defining democracy, although important, presents a variety of challenges.

Various measures of democracy have been posited by scholars. Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub, and Limongi (2000) argue that democracy is a dichotomous variable, existing only if (1) a chief executive is elected; (2) the legislature is elected; (3) there is more than one political party; and (4) a change in power has occurred. Other scholars, however, assert that universal and equal suffrage are essential in the conceptualization of democracy (Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992). This dichotomous notion of democracy, although useful in distinguishing countries from authoritarian regimes, ignores the transitional nature of democratic governance (Lipset 2006). Marshall and Jagger's (2003) Polity IV measure consider the progressive nature of democracy, while other scholars utilize a measure of democratic political rights (Freedom House 2005). The choice of measure, however, strictly depends on the questions being asked.

**Economic Determinants of Democracy**

Much of the democratization literature has focused on other determinants of democracy, specifically economic determinants. Lipset (1959) spurred decades of research with his finding that economic development, measured in wealth, is essential for democracy. Multiple scholars have confirmed the strong correlation with economic development and democracy (Lipset 1959, 1960; Epstein 2006; Boix and Stokes 2003; Fish 2002), but an additional contribution of Lipset (1959) was posing the question: Which comes first? Economic development or a culture primed for democracy?

Furthermore, Lipset contributed to the reawakening of Aristotelian beliefs. Governments seeking representation of the masses can only originate from wealthy, "well-to-do" nations (Lipset 1959, 75). Lipset's premise, known as a form of "modernization theory," posits that democracies cannot exist when a large mass of impoverished citizens are dominated by elites. However, Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub and Limongi (1998) argue that Lipset was only half correct. The authors assert that while Lipset was correct that a democracy is more likely to endure after establishing a wealthy country, modernization theory cannot explain the development of democracies (49).

**Cultural Determinants of Democracy**

The concept of a democratic culture has spurred much debate in political science (Almond & Verba, 1963). Przeworski, Cheibub, and Limongi (1998) found little support that a civic culture is necessary for democracy. Barry (1970) argued that a civic culture is not created to foster democracy, but arises from the effects of democracy (88). Inglehart (1990) argues that democratic culture does exist, but offers a different order to the puzzle. Democracy begins with economic development, which in turn leads to a democratic culture, creating a fertile ground for democracy.

Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens (1992) take a marxist approach to the development of democracy. They argue that the creation of a middle class sets the foundation for democratic governance. They continue to state, however, that a generalizable rule for democracy doesn't exist, and the best scholars can do is attempt to find patterns in the structures of class, state, and transitional clusters (76). Moore (1966) sums up the Marxist view of democracy: "no bourgeoisie, no democracy" (418).!

Figure 5. An excerpt from a literature review in political science. Ideally, the literature review provided originates from the student's discipline.

*as mini-chapter titles, separating out for the reader the otherwise complex ideas into coherent chunks of information.*

The instructor should not stop here, however. Without a discussion on the synthesis of various sources within topics/subheadings (discussed in Step 3), the student may still approach their literature reviews with author-based paragraphs. The next objective, then, is to look at several specific paragraphs within the literature review that use multiple authors, echoing the famous Burkean parlor metaphor, which describes an academic conversation (Burke, 1941).

**Instructor:** Recall how we discussed that our paragraphs in literature reviews should be idea or topic-driven, as opposed to author-driven. Notice the first two paragraphs under the “What is Democracy?” theme. This author identifies two competing definitions of democracy within the same paragraph. In the next paragraph, which discusses the measurement of democracy, this author identifies four separate measurements—all within the same paragraph. This author is experiencing what writing instructors call the Burkean Parlor Metaphor, which argues that you are joining a conversation that began way before your time. Imagine that you walk into this parlor, just trying to get a feel for what’s being said. At this point, you are listening to certain tables in that parlor, noticing how the people sitting at the “What is Democracy?” table are having a debate. These authors, although sometimes separated by 50 or more years, are having a conversation through time. In the literature review, it is your task to help me, the reader, understand what’s being discussed at all of those tables. What did you hear? What did they discuss? What conclusions can you make about those topics?

The benefit of a specific example of a literature review paired with the Burkean Parlor Metaphor should not be underestimated. For some students, simply presenting an abstract template of the literature review (Fig. 2 and Fig. 4) may be sufficient. For other students, however, seeing an actual student’s attempt at writing a literature review can help solidify the lesson. Students walk away confident with a “Well, I can do that” attitude.

## ADDITIONAL GUIDANCE FOR STUDENTS AND INSTRUCTORS

In order for the LRL to be successful, there is additional, important information that instructors need to convey to students during the first lesson or in subsequent applications of the LRL. First, instructors should state explicitly to their students that persons writing a review need to read all of their sources before writing their literature reviews. This may be common sense, but it may not always occur.

Second, as students become familiar with the LRL and write more reviews, instructors should encourage students to use an increased number of relevant, credible sources, which may add to the depth to their arguments. Convey to students, however, that having a large number of sources for the sake of expanding a reference list can create a cumbersome, irrelevant review.

Third, students should be reminded that much of the structure and content of a literature review depends on the discipline and audience for which it is written. Some may argue that the LRL is too formulaic—similar to a five-paragraph essay—or that the specific literature review template might limit student creativity. Providing writing templates is not new (e.g., Graff & Birkenstein, 2006), of course, but I would argue that the LRL template is quite broad and can be used in a variety of ways. The themes a student extracts from the literature can be useful in composing a number of different literature review structures (Feak & Swales, 2009). Furthermore, with the initial confusion of a literature review’s structure resolved, more emphasis can be placed on the importance of content in a review (Birkenstein & Graff, 2008). In my experience, students’ difficulty with structure precludes his or her ability to identify appropriate content.

## DEBRIEFING AND LESSON CONCLUSION

### Students’ increased comfort with literature reviews

Immediately after each lesson, I returned to the topic of the literature review. Students expressed greater comfort with literature reviews, saying that “this seems really easy,

actually” and “this method kind of relieves me.” Dylan mentioned, “This seems to flow a lot better. I had no idea where to start.” Other students discussed how the LRL made the review “. . . so much easier to write” and validated “what I thought in the beginning was right and is something I should’ve been doing all along.” The students’ increased comfort with the literature review often connected to the idea of identifying themes within the context of synthesis and summary. Jessica, who had originally expressed frustration about the literature review assignment, stated:

*Jessica: I didn’t really understand what a lit review was at all. Having this explanation of creating themes and synthesizing helps make it much clearer. I see that the more sources the better because you can put your sources under an umbrella.*

### Students became aware of the importance of structure

In addition to expressing increased comfort with the literature review, many students pinpointed specific areas that were demystified with the LRL, namely structural issues. Sally said, “Once I have that structure, it makes a lot of sense . . . I didn’t even know where to start with this thing.” Rachel corrected her author-based format by seeing that “that grouping feels so much more natural . . . more like what I was seeing in the articles” Charles saw the importance of subheadings for the writer because “the headings tell me where to go. Like sign posts or something.” The importance of structure helped several students pinpoint their specific plans for their reviews. For example, Jeremy felt frustrated with his plan in his pre-lesson interview; however, Jeremy displayed a solid grasp of the literature review and his writing-plan, stating:

*Jeremy: I know how to start this now. It looks like I should really just start looking at the journal articles, the research. Then, I start outlining with the themes. And then I write. I think I was doing all of them together [laugh].*

### Student feedback after one year

As a tutor, I occasionally contacted students for additional feedback on a session; via email, I contacted the participants one year later and asked whether or not the LRL had an impact both on their political science literature review and writing in other academic contexts. Four students responded and elaborated on their experiences since the LRL. Dylan recalled his past feelings of helplessness, saying, “We [students] need [this] because we don’t know what the heck we’re doing with this stuff without guidance.” Jessica and Charles focused on their successes with their original assignment, saying that the LRL helped to create “a way for me to easily and efficiently organize the information I had obtained” and that “I ended up receiving an A+.” Finding the LRL applicable to both reading and writing, Wendy said, “It helps with reading because I’m always looking for themes.” Perhaps most importantly, students found the LRL to be applicable to future writing. Dylan mentioned the LRL:

*Dylan: . . . has also helped me outline various assignments for other classes in a clear and concise way . . . It helped me frame and integrate the various ideas of different authors to make my overall theme of the paper. I got a great grade on the first paper [the literature review], which helped me out with the understanding for later papers.*

Summarizing the LRL's intentions, Jessica reflected on how the LRL changed her writing both in her political science course and how the LRL presents the review as something simple:

***Jessica:** I ended up with a solid grade in the class. I can honestly say the most helpful part of the class was meeting with you. I have had to do a lit review before for another class, and didn't know what in the heck I was supposed to be doing. I felt as if the teacher briefly explained the assignment and let us just "go for it." Now I know what to do each time and how to change it as I need to. If you take anything from my response, I think you should take this: you were helpful because you broke things down—simplified the complexity—by providing outlines of what we were supposed to do.*

In other words, students not only had success with the immediate application of the LRL, but they were also able to apply it to several other academic contexts.

### Feedback from faculty and other students

The LRL has since been presented to over 75 undergraduate students, 40 to 50 graduate students, and a number of faculty across the disciplines who teach WI courses on campus. Feedback from the undergraduate students was consistent with the students in this study. Even though most of the undergraduate students were from various disciplines, I was able to adapt the LRL to each student's needs, primarily through careful selection of disciplinary-specific literature reviews found in academic journal articles. The LRL also connected well to graduate students from across the disciplines, even though the graduate students were writing much longer reviews (20 to 30 pages) relative to the undergraduates. Positive feedback specific toward the LRL's emphasis on structure seemed more pronounced among the graduate students, perhaps due to them managing over 30 to 40 sources for a given paper. In addition to other student feedback, faculty from across our campus have found the LRL to be useful in both undergraduate and graduate-level writing instruction. Faculty in the humanities have adapted the LRL by making themes first connect to a specific text (e.g., a theme found in piece of literature) and then connect that theme to scholarly work (e.g., that same theme discussed in a secondary source). Faculty in the social and physical sciences also adapted the LRL for their own courses, sometimes identifying the themes for the students and other times having the students find their own themes, as in the original LRL. One consistent faculty response toward the LRL is praise for its ability to quickly demystify the literature review and provide sufficient time for the instructor to cover important course content.

In review, the LRL has shown to have both an immediate and longer-term impact on the students' abilities to write literature reviews. Students were more confident following the lesson, often expressing relief that they finally understood what a literature review was and how to write one. Several students reported that they applied the LRL to other courses, suggesting that the strategies in the lesson may be transferable to multiple majors and writing assignments. Finally, faculty feedback across the disciplines has shown that the LRL is adaptable to discipline and can readily be changed for specific course content.



## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Although the LRL was developed in a one-on-one tutoring environment, the lesson can translate into classroom instruction from undergraduate classrooms through graduate education. Since its development, I have presented the LRL to a number of different classrooms across the disciplines with successful results. The following recommendations will help translate the LRL to the classroom.

First, model the tutoring environment by making the lesson conversational as opposed to a lecture-driven format. The LRL works best when students feel free to interrupt the instructor, either for clarification on specific points or for asking questions. Encouraging the student to interrupt when needed helps the instructor to quickly identify and demystify student confusion.

Second, utilize both visual interpretations of the review (i.e., the bubble and bucket graphics). In my experience, the more abstract bubble graphic clarifies the review for some, whereas the more concrete bucket graphic clarifies the review for others. Explaining both in the classroom will help to ensure that all students reach a general understanding of the goal of literature reviews.

Third, have students identify themes used by relevant authors. Similar to step four in the LRL, identifying themes in literature more specific to a student's topic can help that student decide on themes in his or her own literature review. Whether the literature reviewed is academic articles or more mainstream discussions, students should have little trouble identifying how the author groups disparate sources.

Fourth, assuming students have already read at least some of the appropriate literature for their topics, have students identify potential themes for their reviews. The conversation most often following the LRL in the tutoring session concerned an initial look into potential themes for the student's paper. Students would often be able to identify relevant themes without assistance. Remind the students that the themes they identify initially do not necessarily need to be used for their final reviews; some may be combined or divided. This work can be done individually or in groups.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I showed how student fears concerning the structure of the literature review can be alleviated by the LRL. Prior to the lesson, students expressed a number of fears, particularly feelings of helplessness with the writing process. After the LRL, however, student feedback indicated that students left the tutoring session far more confident than when they sat down, often citing specific plans for their future literature reviews. Some of the same students mentioned later that they found the LRL strategies to be helpful in their other courses as well. Furthermore, faculty from across the disciplines have found the LRL to be an efficient, flexible way to demystify the literature review for both undergraduate and graduate students.

There is little doubt that the literature review will remain a staple in both undergraduate and graduate courses. The review forces a writer to make connections between sources and identify the ways in which a writer's own work is positioned in the greater literature (Ridley, 2008). Given its ubiquity in nearly all academic disciplines, budding scholars compose large reviews as part of the thesis or dissertation process. Despite its ubiquity, my experience has shown that explicit instruction on the literature review is

rare, even at a university in which writing instruction across the disciplines is well-known and respected.

Direct instruction on how to write a literature review is essential. Though there are a number of impressive guidebooks that can help students with the literature review (e.g., Garrard, 2011; Hart, 1998; Machi & McEvoy, 2009), most guidebooks focus on the process leading up to writing, not the writing itself. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that undergraduate students will read and ingest an entire book on the literature review process. What these guidebooks cannot offer is the benefit of direct instruction of writing the review from the very instructor grading the review. Unfortunately, my experience has shown that many excellent college instructors are unaware of student confusions regarding the writing of a review, and thus fail to take class time to explain what it is and how to write one effectively.

The LRL outlined in this article has been shown to be both effective across the disciplines and flexible enough to be tailored to any classroom. The class time needed to present the lesson is minimal, allowing faculty sufficient time to focus on important content-area information. If the literature review is to remain a staple in higher education, the LRL can serve as a quick guide for all budding scholars.

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