Organizing, Outlining, and Writing a Literature Review

Three Things to Keep in Mind
As you write your literature review, you should keep the following in mind:
- The goal of your literature review is to locate *your* project within a research tradition, as well as identify a gap in practice and the research that will help you address that gap. Your literature review should discuss the topics (related to *your* topic) that have been studied before, the methods used to study them, and the findings.
- In a sense, a literature review should read like a bunch of "summaries with a purpose." Your literature review should include a lot of summaries of articles and chapters and books, but it shouldn't read as if the summaries are there only to prove that that you read a lot of things. There should be a *purpose* to the summaries, and that purpose is to identify a gap in practice and ways that you might address that gap using research and methods (and/or variations on methods) that have been used before.
- A good literature review is organized around ideas, not sources. It is organized around the topics that have been studied before, what we know and don't know, what we agree and disagree on, and the methods used to study those topics, all related to *your* research problem and questions.

And Now, A Process: Organizing and Drafting Literature Reviews
First, think about the audience and purpose for your literature review.
- Audience: Fellow scholars and researchers, the same people whose articles you've been reading.
- Purpose:
  - Show that your topic is an important issue – an authentic and relevant problem of practice – that it is of interest to people working in your field. You do that by showing that other people have studied the topic, or things similar to the topic, or have been asking and wondering about questions that are related to the topic.
  - Show that there is a gap in practice, a "gap between the existing and preferred organizational state (the 'goal' state)."
  - Show that there is useful and relevant literature out there that addresses similar issues, but not these issues. The existing literature is a good start, but there are gaps in the literature (a gap in our knowledge, a gap in what we know about this). That's why we need your study. You do that by showing that *this* has been studied, but not *that* (a gap in topics). Or this has been studied *this way*, but not *that way* (a gap in methods). Or we know *this* about our topics, but we don't know *that*, or what we do know seems not quite settled (a gap in findings/knowledge).
  - Show that you can effectively address the gap. You do this by giving your readers the sense that your literature review is thorough. You've covered all the bases, looked into all the corners.

Then, draft it. Organize your literature review by sub-topics, in a sense. What people are talking about in relation to your topic. Write about what they've studied (topics), what they've found (knowledge), and how they've gone about finding that stuff (methods), and how it relates to *your* research problem and questions.

Broadly speaking, here is the basic organizational pattern of a literature review:
- Start with an introductory section. Introduce the topic(s), tell us why it's important (significance), forecast your discussion, and give us a sense of what you found in the literature.

- Discuss all the research. Organized by ideas or themes, not sources. Put your sources in conversation with each other, in a way that shows what we know and how we know it, the gaps, and how it relates to *your* research problem and questions. A good literature review is never organized chronologically – "Here is something I read and it says this. And then I read this other thing and it says that. And then this third thing…. Zzzzz…"
- Discuss the gap in practice and the research. This is where you pull it all together and really delineate the gap(s) you have found. (Because right after this comes your proposal – how you will fill those gaps).