

How to Read for a Literature Review

I don't want to get all 8th grade English term paper on you, but this method does include the distinct possibility of making yourself a reading grid.

The Basic Idea: Read With Eye on Topics, Methods, and Findings

Read each of your articles or book chapters with an eye on three key things:

- Topics (what was studied, and how they relate to your research problem and questions)
- Methods (how it was studied)
- Findings (what the study found out)

So, after you read each article, you should have a good idea of what the researchers studied, how they studied it, and what they discovered. Here is what they looked at, here is how they looked at it, and here is what they learned.

How Does This Kind of Reading Fit Into the Literature Review Process?

It sets you up nicely to actually organize and then write your Literature Review. Your Literature Review will be organized around ideas, not articles. A Literature Review is not a summary of the articles you read, in the order you read them. Instead, it is a discussion of what has been studied, how it has been studied, and what we know because of these studies, all in relation to *your* research problem and questions.

A good Literature Review points out gaps in practice and how the literature helps us (or doesn't help us) address those gaps – gaps in terms of what we've studied, how we've studied it, and what we know. A good Literature Review also points out disagreements in the literature: some studies might suggest this in their findings, while others suggest that. These gaps and disagreements are where you will eventually locate *your* study. That is the point of a Literature Review – to show that your study is valuable and important because it will improve your local practice and, by extension, contribute to our knowledge by looking at a new topic, studying a topic in a new way, or contributing more data to our discussions of the topic.

So Maybe You Make a Reading Grid...

A graduate student of mine over in the English department made a reading grid. And here is what it looked like:

| Article | Topic(s)/Goal(s) | Methods | Results | Notes to Self |
|---|--|--|---|--|
| Jennifer Corroy "Institutional Change and the University of Wisconsin-Madison Writing Fellows Program" | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To show Writing Fellows/embedded instructors make institutional change. • This change is at the whole-college level, but more importantly affects the body of teaching writing within it. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two Writing Fellows embedded in two courses (Scandinavian Studies & English Comp.) • Professors were interviewed after the process. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WF acted as translator between Prof. of Scan. Studies and students. • Prof. of Scan. Studies began to comment more on style. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shows topic is studied. • One method – interviews with profs. • Study is limited, anecdotal. |