WRITING THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning Support
A literature review is used to evaluate the current scholarship on a particular research topic and prepare the reader to enter the academic conversation about the topic. The literature review helps the researcher identify trends, developments, and gaps in current studies.

This power point will walk you through the steps for critically analyzing the literature and then writing a strong and comprehensive literature review.
A LITERATURE REVIEW…

1. Supports a clear and concise thesis*.
   Your literature review should include an introduction that ends in a thesis. The thesis will respond to the question: What is the purpose of your literature review and why is it significant/important from a social work perspective? As you write your thesis, consider also how to phrase it so that the thesis clearly responds to the assignment instructions.

2. Is organized around ideas and methodologies rather than by article.
   In other words, avoid writing a paragraph addressing one article at a time. Instead, discuss trends, strengths and weaknesses, or gaps in the articles you’ve read.

3. Places sources in conversation with each other.
   By including more than one article per paragraph, you can focus on topics and patterns in the literature.
1. Supports a clear and concise thesis or research question.

2. Is organized around ideas and methodologies rather than by article. In this case, the idea around which the article is organized is that cultural stigma affects help-seeking behaviors among Asian-American college students.

3. Places sources in conversation with each other (include more than one source in each paragraph). Here, Nguyen and Anderson are cited as agreeing with Lee et al.

CHOOSE A TOPIC AND DEVELOP A RESEARCH QUESTION

After reading the assignment guidelines*, choose a preliminary topic that drives and inspires you as a social worker.

Example of a topic:
Intervention used to treat stress in college students

Develop a preliminary research question that will help you to select key words for your literature search. Note: Your thesis statement will eventually address the research question you are asking.

Example of a research question:
What intervention should be used for addressing stress in undergraduate students?

* See the Reading Assignment Guidelines tutorial at: http://libguides.usc.edu/SOWKlearningsupport
FINDING RELEVANT, PUBLISHED STUDIES

Once you have a preliminary research question, examine what published scholars have to say about the topic*.

Find a variety of sources for a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Make sure to include more than one perspective on your topic. If everyone is in agreement, the topic is less controversial and your analysis less necessary.

Limit time spent on research. When you have a good overall understanding of the current theories, perspectives, and issues related to your topic, STOP.

You can (and should) go back and do additional research later. After you complete your first draft, you will have a better idea of what additional data would improve your literature review.

* See the Research and Active Reading tutorial at: libguides.usc.edu/SOWKlearningsupport
**RESEARCH TIPS**

**Use appropriate databases.** The Libguides have excellent resources including two videos and a list of Social Work – relevant databases.

**Choose a variety of search terms**, as phrasing and terminology may change over time. You may find that “College” is more popular in recent articles than “undergraduate” or that “acculturation” is used more frequently than “cultural adaptation.”

- For help developing search terms from a topic, see the “Research Topic to Search Results” powerpoint and the USC Library’s “Search Strategy Worksheet”.
- After you find a few relevant articles, incorporate terms they utilize to supplement your own search.
- See which articles your favorite source cites in its reference page. Recent references may be worth reviewing.
REVISE YOUR RESEARCH QUESTION
During your research, you may pinpoint specific interventions or populations on which to focus, or you might notice gaps in current research for your study to fill. Do not be afraid to revise your research question! If your question is too broad, you will not be able to effectively address all aspects in one paper. Just make sure you are still addressing the assignment instructions.

Old research question:
What intervention should be used for addressing stress in undergraduate students?

Revised research question:
What are best practices for social workers to address acculturative stress among Asian American college students?

Possible thesis:
Using CBT to promote health-seeking behaviors among Asian American college students allows social workers to address acculturative stress effectively.
EXERCISE - SEARCH TERMS

Research Question: Which intervention should be used for addressing stress in undergraduate students?

1. Which search terms would you use for this research question?

2. Where would you begin your search?

3. What search parameters should you use?

4. How might you revise and refine your search?
At the top left is a search using keywords from the preliminary research question: What interventions should be used for addressing stress in undergraduate students? The search yields 16,900 results even after limiting results to the last four years.

At the bottom is a search using keywords from the revised research question: What are best practices for social workers to address acculturative stress among Asian American college students? Now, there are only 352 results.

Revising your research question helps to focus your research and provide more relevant results.
READING THE LITERATURE

Highlight:

- Similarities and differences among the sources
- The argument/thesis statements for each source
- Main points of each article (hint: look at the section headings and topic sentences)
- Use the “study comparison” chart on the next slide to help you organize information for side-by-side comparison!

*MS Word Literature Review Worksheet is available at: http://libguides.usc.edu/SOWKlearningsupport
Consider using this chart for each article you use to help you compare, synthesize, or draw conclusions from the literature. Using the chart will save you time so you do not have to re-read the articles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)’ research question/goal</th>
<th>Research question:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>Where did the research take place?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Who was the target population?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeframe</td>
<td>Over what length of time was the research conducted?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>What intervention was used?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory</td>
<td>What theory informed the format and purpose of the study?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>What methodology was used?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design</td>
<td>What research design was used?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>What were the results of the study?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>What do the authors have to say about the study and results?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>What do the authors conclude? Suggestions for future research?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of author’s research? Are there instances or frameworks the author neglects to mention? Any inconsistencies?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chart created by Jennifer Nichols, Learning Support Lead Content Tutor
LOOK FOR GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

Once you have completed a chart for each source, use the charts to identify gaps in the literature that your research might fill.

Identify information missing from the literature.
- For example, you may find plentiful information about stress among Caucasian college students, but not Asian American
- Or you may find that articles about EBP for treating stress in college students does not take cultural differences into account

If the literature review indicates a gap that your research study or discussion may fill, identify the missing pieces in the literature review where appropriate, based on your assignment instructions.
Comparing and contrasting the charts can help the writer to identify similarities and differences among sources.

**Similarities**

- Compare “apples and apples.” In other words, make sure that you review your charts to see if comparison is possible. Identify in what ways articles are similar as well as how they are different. Example: If one article focuses only on female Asian American undergraduate students while another focuses only on males, to what extent can you compare the two?

- Identify the ways in which articles agree. Example: How many articles indicate a connection between stress and acculturation? How many indicate a connection between help-seeking behaviors and stress in Asian American college students? Do they agree in their research methods? In the theories they use as a foundation for their reasoning?
LOOK FOR DIFFERENCES

If sources disagree, consider why. Example: If one source says Asian American students experience high levels of acculturative stress in college and another says they do not, why might that be?

Do not ignore dissenting opinions. Instead, identify the potential reasons for the differing opinions and assess their validity. It is okay to change your opinion. If you are not convinced, include a counterargument to the reasoning in the source where appropriate, based on your assignment instructions.

A counterargument is a set of ideas that logically explains why the literature you oppose may be incorrect, using your reasoning and that of other authors to support you. What if the study that found Asian American students do not have high levels of acculturative stress used a population in a university with a highly supportive Asian American student organization?

*Your argument is stronger if you address opposition instead of ignoring it.
In a literature review, organization is vital. **Do not organize information by source.** Instead, organize the literature review by themes, which may include methodologies, theories, and topics.

Consider the example thesis below.

Using CBT to promote health-seeking behaviors among Asian American college students allows social workers to address acculturative stress effectively.

**Exercise:**
Remember the similarity stating CBT is a good intervention for addressing stress? CBT could be a theme.

**What are some other potential themes?**
Consider the example thesis:
Using CBT to promote health-seeking behaviors among Asian American college students allows social workers to address acculturative stress effectively

Potential themes may include:
- How the literature defines the problem of acculturative stress
- Which populations are studied for acculturative stress among college students
- How the literature analyzes help-seeking behaviors among Asian American students
- Which theories support the use of CBT for acculturative stress

Your themes should be directly related to the topics and sections outlined in your assignment instructions. Remember, depending on the required length of your literature review, you may have one paragraph for each theme, or several paragraphs for each theme.
ACTIVITY: ORGANIZATION

Identifying how your research relates to the themes you choose to explore is crucial! As you read your articles, you will be selecting information to include in your paper. Once you begin writing, you must identify which information belongs together and which belongs under a new subheading or in a new paragraph. Remember: only one main idea per paragraph!

Consider the following research question:

What are best practices for social workers to address acculturative stress among Asian American college students?

Organize the sentences on the following slide by theme:
1. Stress - stress among college students
   Or
2. Acculturation - acculturative stress among Asian American students
ACTIVITY: ORGANIZATION

Sentence 1: “Although college is a stressful time for many students, studies have shown that Asian American college students evidence greater psychological distress than do their European American counterparts” (Abe & Zane; Okazaki, as cited in Castillo, Zahn, & Cano, 2012).

Sentence 2: “Scholars have suggested that stressors such as intergenerational family conflict and parents’ expectations to maintain their heritage culture contribute to the acculturative stress that these students experience” (Castillo, Conoley, Brossart, & Quiros, 2007; Lee & Liu, 2001, as cited in Castillo, et al., 2012).

Sentence 3: “Lee et al. (2000) found that acculturative family conflict was significantly related to acculturative stress” (as cited in Castillo et al., 2012).

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Sentence 3: “Lee et al. (2000) found that acculturative family conflict was significantly related to acculturative stress” (as cited in Castillo et al., 2012)
THEMES AND PARAGRAPH STRUCTURE

Note that even though all of the information came from the same source, it is not part of the same theme, and therefore does not belong in the same paragraph*. 

The topic sentence for each paragraph indicates the theme you will be discussing.

- Your topic sentence should state the theme for each paragraph and why it is important to understanding your topic.

Supporting sentences include evidence about your theme which you located in the literature, layered with your analysis and explanation of that evidence.

- Supporting sentences should also include analysis of what you learned about the theme by reviewing multiple sources/articles.

* See “Creating Strong Paragraphs” PowerPoint at: http://libguides.usc.edu/SOWKlearningsupport
SAMPLE LITERATURE REVIEW PARAGRAPH

The paragraph on the next slide demonstrates how a theme might become a complete paragraph related to the thesis developed toward the beginning of this tutorial.

Thesis: Using CBT to promote health-seeking behaviors among Asian American college students allows social workers to address acculturative stress effectively.

**Elements of the sample paragraph:**

Topic and concluding sentences are underlined and not cited. The topic and concluding sentences tie the specific *theme* of the paragraph – change in approaches to measuring acculturation and enculturation – to the topic of the paper, specifically acculturative stress.

Evidence from a source is in red and cited. Note that three sources are incorporated into the paragraph to show the contributions of multiple studies to the literature.

Analysis of the literature is in black and not cited. Analysis should always be in your own words and should be used to show your understanding of evidence as it relates to the topic of the paragraph.
In the literature, researchers have captured a more complex picture by measuring both enculturation and acculturation, which can improve the way social workers understand stress in Asian American college students. In the past, enculturation, or adherence to one’s culture of origin, was seen as one pole of a dichotomy; acculturation, or adherence to a second culture, was at the other pole (Miller, Yang, Hui, Choi & Lim, 2011). More recently, a bilinear model measuring acculturation independently from enculturation shows that an increase in identification with one culture does not always result in a lower identification with another (Ruzek, Nguyen, Herzog & David, 2011). The bilinear model suggests students may develop values and behaviors biculturally, rather than experiencing a single, linear progression from enculturation to acculturation, and therefore allows for differences among individuals. The bilinear model also introduces the idea that a student who adopts values and behaviors typically attributed to one culture will not necessarily relinquish identification with the second culture. In fact, according to Kim and Omizo, Asian American students who become proficient in the dominant Western culture while maintaining their existing cultural values experience less acculturation-related stress (as cited in Panelo, 2010). Therefore, according to the literature, the ability to measure acculturation and enculturation separately will allow the social worker to more accurately assess where the student is struggling. The development of this bilinear framework, in which acculturation and enculturation can exist simultaneously, is crucial for better understanding stress in Asian American college students.
ACTIVITY: REFLECTING ON THE PARAGRAPH

- All sources should be cited in-text in the literature review.
  Did the paragraph cite all sources?

- Do not just rely on one source for each theme. The literature review needs to inform the reader about multiple perspectives written about your topic.
  Did the paragraph incorporate multiple perspectives?

- Integrate the information from a source into your writing rather than summarizing the source.
  Did the paragraph paraphrase sufficiently?
  Did the analysis help integrate the source material with the topic sentence?

- Do not be too global. For example, do not discuss the entire history of mental illness when the topic is mental illness in the workplace.
  Was the paragraph sufficiently specific?
RESOURCES

Learning Support Resources can be found at: http://libguides.usc.edu/SOWKlearningsupport

• “Reading Assignment Guidelines” tutorial
• “Organizing Your Paper” tutorial
• “Research and Active Reading” tutorial
• “Lit Review Chart” in MS Word
• “Creating Strong Paragraphs” tutorial

General Library Resources

• List of Social Work relevant databases at: http://libguides.usc.edu/socialwork/databases
REFERENCES


