

## **A Process for Reviewing and Analyzing Literature**

1. Your first task: To "get your head around" the topic you have selected and what the literature you are reviewing says about the topic.

### Strategy

- a) Read the articles, without much note-taking, to get an overview of the topic and the authors' treatments of it. Photocopy the articles, so that you will be able to write things on them.

2. Your second task: To begin to "interact with" the literature.

### Strategies

- a) Write headings on pieces of scrap paper under which you will accumulate notes. Use only one side of the pages. Your headings can be article-specific ("Article X"), issue-specific ("Gender-specific effects of alcohol"), or both ("Article X on gender-specific effects of alcohol"). The latter two types of heading will probably serve you better than the first one, though.
- b) Re-read the articles slowly and carefully, stopping where appropriate to highlight things you may wish to return to, and/or to write in marginal comments. Begin to write in pertinent information you find on the scrap paper, under the headings you have created. Add to and revise your headings, as necessary.

3. Your third task: To create a written overview of your own of the topic and its treatment, which will launch you into your eventual written discussion.

### Strategies

- a) Consider the notes you have taken, along with any highlighting or marginal scribbles you have done on your photocopied literature. Attempt some kind of "visual brainstorming" (free-writing and mind-mapping can be very helpful techniques, here). What you are seeking in your brainstorming is a position or angle of your own on the issue in question, based on compelling points the authors have made or, conversely, points over which they disagree or points you feel they do not sufficiently address.
- b) Attempt to write a sentence that you feel signifies what you have learned - or failed to learn - about the chosen topic, based on your readings. (Example: "While there is consensus in the articles that alcohol consumption can promote longevity, differing positions on the contributing effects of gender, diet, and lifestyle make it dangerous to generalize about alcohol's relationship to long life in humans.") Alternatively, attempt to pose a question that you feel identifies the chief problem/issue you have discovered in the literature's treatment of your topic. (Example: "Can

alcohol consumption be definitely said to contribute to human longevity, given the disputes in the literature over the roles of gender, diet, and lifestyle in alcohol's effects?") This claim or question will end up being your thesis, and it will help you to proceed with your planning of your review. (Don't be surprised, though, if you end up revising or even totally changing your thesis as your review evolves.)

c) Note: This step is one you may choose to delay until you have written a substantial portion of your draft; whether or not you feel ready to do it now depends on how you think and how you write! Attempt to write a rough, introductory paragraph that moves from the general to the specific (your thesis!), one that will situate your particular concern in the more general concerns of which it is a part. Here is a suggested "blueprint" for your introduction:

1. Introduce the topic, including any relevant historical context;
2. Provide a rationale for your review (why is considering this topic worth your time - and your reader's?);
3. Identify the articles you will be reviewing and critiquing, explaining briefly why you have chosen these particular articles, as a way to »
4. Present your thesis statement/pose your thesis question.

4. Your fourth task: To plan the way you will describe and critique the articles' treatment of your topic.

### Strategies

- a) Begin to sketch outlines of the direction of your paper for yourself. Do not feel that you need to commit yourself to any of these outlines. Simply try to envision, through outlining, how the key points made in each article complement - or else, challenge - one another, and how you can best use them to create a discussion of your own about the topic that incorporates the shared (or opposing) voices of these authors.
- b) Read the articles yet again, this time assessing which of your outlines (if any) will best assist you in discussing and evaluating them. Do not be alarmed if you find yourself adding to, deleting from, or discarding your outlines as you proceed. This is how you will finally arrive at a writing plan that propels you to begin your actual literature review. Make liberal jot notes on your outline(s), as you re-read the articles.

### Possible Outline Models

#### I. Introduction

## II. Article X

- a) Summarize the article (when and how was the study done, what was its key focus, etc.).
- b) Describe in detail what the article says about:
  - a) Sub-issue #1 (e.g., gender)
  - b) Sub-issue #2 (e.g., lifestyle)
  - c) Sub-issue #3 (e.g., diet)

## Article Y

(Same procedure)

## Article Z

(Same procedure)

## III. Compare, Contrast and Critique

- a) What all three say about sub-issue #1
- b) What all three say about sub-issue #2
- c) What all three say about sub-issue #3

## IV. Draw Conclusions, by answering these questions:

So what?  
Where do I stand now?  
Where does this leave us?  
What next?

- OR -

## I. Introduction

## II. Brief Summaries (perhaps one paragraph for each of the articles, X, Y and Z)

## III. Compare, Contrast and Critique what the three articles say about:

Sub-issue #1 (e.g., gender)  
Sub-issue #2 (e.g., lifestyles)  
Sub-issue #3 (e.g., diet)

## IV. Draw Conclusions

5. Your fifth task: To create a rough draft of your paper.

## Strategies

- a) Select the outline (writing plan) with which you feel most comfortable, and use it to create several body paragraphs (or, if you feel ready to do so now, the introduction). A helpful hint: If you are hesitant about your spelling/grammar/sentence-writing skills, or if your discussion involves scientific concepts which you find hard to fully articulate, don't worry about these things just now. It is most important that you write out what you understand and explore where you think you are going, at this point. You can correct the errors and be more exacting about the science later! After you have written a few paragraphs, re-assess the direction you selected in your outline. Are your newly-written paragraphs leading you away from your planned course? Are they perhaps leading you in a direction that now makes more sense to you than the one you had planned? Do not be surprised if you end up changing your writing plan as you pursue your ideas. Most writers do just that.
  - b) Continue writing. When you feel you have created a satisfactory draft, leave it - for an hour, overnight, for a day. Only when you have left it will you be able to return to it and assess it at all objectively. This is also an excellent time to ask someone else you trust to read it (your professor, someone you live with, a tutor at the Writing Centre). These readers will undoubtedly read it with greater objectivity than you! If you have not accomplished what you feel you should have, revise accordingly.
6. Your sixth task: To continue revising - and also to proofread - your work.

## Strategy

- a) Leave your draft - again! - and return to it. Re-read it several more times: once for flow of ideas, with no regard for mechanics; finally for mechanics, with no regard for flow of ideas (it's nearly impossible to effectively assess both things at once!) Ideally have a trusted second reader read it critically, once again. Revise and edit accordingly.