LITERATURE REVIEWS

A literature review is an assessment of scholarly literature written about a specific topic and serves as an essential foundation for continued research. Besides demonstrating your knowledge of scholarship on a topic, literature reviews are meant to summarize, analyze, and synthesize the most important parts of a source. Literature reviews are helpful for affirming how well you understand information on your topic and informing readers about the research that has already been done in that particular field.

Core Elements:

In general, literature reviews should contain the following elements:

- A full bibliographic entry of a source
- A brief overview, including the source's topic, thesis, author background, or other necessary context
- The author's perspective and motivation for writing
- The author's main arguments, the data or evidence used to support those arguments, and counterarguments
- A fair evaluation of strengths and weaknesses of the source
- Comparisons and connections with other literature on the same topic
- Reflections on the research's implications (how the source's results can be used, how its methodology can be improved, and how it affects the larger body of literature on the topic)

Scholarly Literature:

"Scholarly literature" is literature containing research or findings assembled and presented by scholars or specialists in a specific field, such as history, psychology, or biology. In the case of peer-reviewed articles, the articles have undergone evaluation by other specialists in the author's field in an effort to produce higher-quality, more-reliable work. Books may or may not be scholarly (which makes literature reviews of books all the more necessary—for assessing the quality and contributions of an author's work).

Active Reading & Asking Questions:

When you begin reading literature for the purpose of writing a review, you can do yourself a favor by reading actively and taking notes *throughout* the process. One of the best ways to engage more deeply with a text is to ask questions as you read. Though you can't discuss an author's text with him or her face-to-face while reading, strive to see the text as a discussion or interaction between you and the author rather than a big heap of information that needs to be absorbed.

For example, if you're reading a book and come across an inconsistency in the author's argument, make a note of it and consider possible reasons for the inconsistency. Is the author operating on flawed logic? Where did he or she go wrong? If you notice that an author uses data in a unique way compared to other authors that's especially effective for supporting a point, make note of that too. Use sticky notes, highlight/underline passages, write in page margins, and keep a notebook or digital document for making cross-references to important parts of the text—for instance, recording page numbers each time you notice an author's bias in their article so that you can point to evidence of this bias in your review. Taking notes and especially asking questions while reading can save time and provide substance once you're ready to put all the information together in a single review.

Examples of Questions to Ask While Reading:

- What is unique about this source compared to others I've read?
- What is the author trying to tell me, the reader, about how he/she feels about his/her topic? What biases exist? What does his/her tone and word choice reveal?
- What is the author's main argument? Am I convinced?
- Why has the author chosen to use his/her sources this way or in this place in the text?
- How does the author handle opposing arguments? Is his/her counterargument effective or lacking?
- Is the author's research methodology sound? What were the author's research limitations? Is there anything that he or she could have done differently? How can other specialists improve on this research?

Unique Formatting:

The example above presents general formatting suggestions. However, please be aware that many professors and publications have their own formatting standards for literature reviews.