Writing Literature Reviews and Research Proposals

Information Sources

• Primary (empirical) sources
  – original; empirical; first published account
  – details on methodology, findings, and discussion
  – systematic observation (carefully planned)

• Secondary sources
  – found in books, magazines, newspapers
  – global descriptions of findings
3 Potential Problems with Empirical Research

- **Sampling**
  - unrepresentativeness
  - sampling bias

- **Measurement**
  - flawed instrumentation (surveys, interviews, observation, experimentation)
  - multiple measures -- consistent results?

- **Problem identification**
  - researchers studying same problem might examine different specific (narrow) areas of the problem
Other Sources

• Theoretical articles
  – theory built on existing empirical work
  – pieces of theory can be tested empirically
  – follow up on leads in bibliography

• Literature review articles
  – new and fresh insights that advance knowledge
    • resolve conflicts in articles that contradict each other
    • identify new ways to interpret results
    • lay out a path for future research/generate propositions

• Antecdotal Reports (do NOT use these)
Writing Process

• Planning
  – defining a topic and selecting literature

• Organizing
  – analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating review articles

• Drafting
  – writing a first draft of the review

• Editing
  – checking draft for completeness, cohesion, correctness

• Redrafting
Questions to Ask in Evaluating an Empirical Article

- Are there obvious sampling problems?
- Are there obvious measurement problems?
- Is the problem narrow enough? Too narrow?
- Are there any other flaws in the paper?
- Does the research make an important contribution to advancing knowledge?
Questions to Ask in Evaluating Review Articles

• Have the reviewers clearly identified the topic of review?
• Have the reviewers indicated its delimitations (time period, aspects of the problem, etc)?
• Have the reviewers written a cohesive essay that guides you through the lit from topic to topic?
• Have the reviewers interpreted the literature (as opposed to summarizing)?
• Did the reviewers make an important contribution?
Identifying Literature

• Search an appropriate database
  – can start with general topic
  – better to start with more specific topic, but can narrow down a general topic after seeing list of articles

• Shorten list to a manageable size
  – which articles pertain to your major field of study?
  – reclassify articles in the list
  – is the journal respected in your field?
Additional Steps to Get Started

• Write the first draft of your topic sentence
  – name the area you will investigate, in general
  – after examining more focused list of articles
• Pick on-line databases that are appropriate for your topic
• As you search databases for articles and narrow your search, redefine your topic more narrowly.
• Start with the most current and work backwards
Synthesizing Literature

• 1. Decide purpose and voice
  – Purpose:
    • term paper, dissertation/thesis, journal article?
  – Voice:
    • formal, de-emphasize self, avoid first person (usually)

• 2. Consider how to reassemble your notes
  – NOT a series of annotations of research studies
  – describe the forest (not the trees) from a unique perspective using the trees you found
  – how do the pieces relate to each other?
Develop a Coherent Essay

• Remember: this is not an annotated bibliography (a series of connected article summaries). Review should have a clearly stated argument, developed in such a way that all elements work together to communicate a well-reasoned account of argument.

• 1. Describe review outline for reader
  – introductory paragraphs should include roadmap of where you are going in paper

• 2. Near beginning, state what will and won’t be covered
Develop a Coherent Essay

– 3. Specify your point of view early

– 4. Aim for a clear and cohesive essay; avoid annotations

– 5. Use transitions to help trace your argument
  • e.g., first, second, third
Formatting Notes

• Do not use first person (I, me, my, etc.)

• Use one-inch margins throughout

• Use Time New Roman 12-point fonts

• Be sure all of your cites are in reference list

• Reference List must be double-spaced, in alpha order, with first line of each indented five spaces to the left of the other lines