Writing A Literature Review For An Applied Master's Degree

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Abstract
Many of the books and articles that discuss and provide instructions for writing a literature review are geared to doctoral students (Randolph, 2009), professors, researchers, and medical researchers. Few discuss the issues pertaining to Master's Degree students pursuing an applied master's degree. This overview is written specifically for those completing a capstone for the Master's Degree in Organizational Dynamics at the University of Pennsylvania.

Graduate students often experience a great deal of trepidation and anxiety when facing the task of writing a literature review for their Master's Degree capstone. This is unfortunate, as reading the literature and writing a literature review can be an informative, interesting and thought-provoking endeavor. Graduate students have the opportunity to learn about an issue of importance to them, to gain a thorough understanding of the research that has been conducted about their capstone focus, and learn what gaps exist in the literature in their area of focus.

Keywords
literature review, writing

Comments
Working Paper #16-01

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"Reviewing the literature is not stamp collecting. A good review does not just summarize the literature, but discusses it critically, identifies methodological problems, and points out research gaps"  
*(Pautasso, 2013, p. 3).*

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Graduate students often experience a great deal of trepidation and anxiety when facing the task of writing a literature review for their Master's Degree capstone. This is unfortunate, as reading the literature and writing a literature review can be an informative, interesting and thought-provoking endeavor. Graduate students have the opportunity to learn about an issue of importance to them, to gain a thorough understanding of the research that has been conducted about their capstone focus, and learn what gaps exist in the literature in their area of focus.

**Main Goals of a Literature Review**

A literature review in a master's capstone has three main goals:
- **To enhance your understanding of the issues you are examining so that your capstone is well-informed and thorough, and so that your capstone is focused and relevant.** The literature review informs every aspect of your capstone: your research questions, hypotheses and goals, and your methodology.
- **To provide the reader with a critical review of the research related to your capstone topic.**
To highlight the gaps in the literature which justify the focus of your capstone. For example, if you are examining organization change efforts done in preparation for changing market conditions you will highlight how few studies have been done with this focus.

Step 1 - Initial Look at the Literature

The first step in the literature review process is to examine some of what has been written about the proposed focus of your capstone. Once you have an initial idea of what you plan to examine in your capstone, do a brief search of the literature to look for significant research in that area. Say, for example, that you are considering looking at the issue of resiliency during times of organizational crisis. Use the resources you learned about during the library session in the capstone course to do an initial search for articles and books related to this topic. It is important to rely, as much as possible, on peer reviewed journal articles. We will discuss this issue more below. First, look to see if there are any articles that provide a literature review or a meta-analysis of research articles in this area. Finding such a source is the equivalent of finding gold, as these articles will give you an overview of the area you are interested in and they often highlight recent findings and gaps in the literature. If not, look for recent articles and examine their literature review sections to see what articles are referred to repeatedly, what authors are seen as experts in this area, and if there are books that have recently been published in this area. Read four or five articles to get an overview of the current thinking and research in this area. As you do this initial reading here are some questions that can help you in the beginning:

- What is the current research focused on?
- What recent discoveries, understandings, and/or theories have been put forward in this area?
- What are experts in the field saying about gaps in the field?
- What are experts in the field recommending that future research focus on?
- In what ways do the articles help you to refine and narrow the focus of your capstone?

After reading these articles ask yourself if you are still interested in this area of focus.

The goal of Step 1 is to familiarize yourself with some key articles that pertain to your potential area of capstone focus. By the end of Step 1 you should have a clear idea of whether this is a focus which will retain your interest and engagement and whether you want to pursue it for your capstone research. If you decide this focus is unlikely to retain your interest then it is important to find a focus that will and repeat Step 1. When you have completed Step 1 you will have settled on a capstone focus and will likely have a good idea of how to narrow your topic to a more manageable scope.

Step 2 - Research Question(s)/ Hypotheses / Goals

Step 2 involves writing an initial research question(s) or developing hypotheses. Research questions and hypotheses should be written once you have delineated the goals of your capstone research. During the Capstone Seminar there will be discussion about what research questions and hypotheses are, how to draft ones that are meaningful and doable, and how they serve as a guide to the whole capstone project. You should work with your capstone advisor to craft solid research questions. This is one of the most important steps involved in writing a capstone. Poor research questions inevitably lead to poor capstones, so set yourself up for success and put the work needed into crafting a solid, clear and focused research question(s). Embarking on a capstone with vague or fuzzy research question(s) or hypotheses will undercut your ability to produce a thoughtful, substantive and rigorous capstone. Ravitch and Carl (2016) have practical and clear guidance about drafting and iterating research questions. Your research question(s) and/or hypotheses will guide your in-depth literature search.
Step 3 - Reviewing/Reading The Literature

Once you have a research question(s) and/or hypotheses you can start your in-depth review of the literature.

This document will not cover the actual literature search part of the process. During the Capstone Seminar you will visit the library and a research librarian will provide basic instructions about how to conduct literature searches. In addition, a reference librarian is connected with the Organizational Dynamics Program and can assist in literature searches. Searching for relevant literature can be frustrating and sometimes confusing, so take advantage of the reference librarians who are trained in this important and essential skill. Here are some issues to keep in mind:

- The terms you use to search for relevant literature are sometimes not straightforward. At times the scholars and researchers use words or phrases that might not be familiar to you and until you use them for your search you may not unearth the important references you are looking for. For example, say that you are looking for positive approaches to performance reviews. If you are not aware that the literature is now calling positive approaches "strength-based approaches," you might spend a lot of time looking for literature under a keyword that is no longer primary.
- Reference librarians, especially the person who works with Organizational Dynamics, can be invaluable. They have a great deal of experience in trying different key words or phrases and they often know what phrases are currently in use.
- Every article you read that is related to your topic does double duty as a reference source. Scour the literature review section and the reference lists in each one. These will be invaluable resources.

A few words about sources. It is important that the majority of the sources for your capstone consist of peer reviewed journal articles. There are several reasons we want you to focus on peer reviewed research.

- Peer reviewed journals contain articles that have been reviewed by knowledgeable peers, experts in the field, and an editor(s). This means that the articles meet certain scientific, philosophical, theoretical and ethical standards. For more information about the focus of a particular journal, go to the journal’s website to consult the mission and standards for that journal.
- Peer reviewed journals differentiate between opinion and research.
- Articles in peer reviewed journals build on previous research in the field, almost always contain a literature review, and include important references which will aid you in your search.

Books can be a valuable source of information for your capstone, especially edited books that include chapters by experts in your area of focus. Popular books, which proliferate like flies in the business field, can lead you to research and other sources. Use popular books to point you to more substantive research, but do not rely on them for the main part of your literature review. There are some exceptions to this. If you are examining an area for which there is not yet a lot of research, popular books may be one of the few sources available. For example, a capstone student looked at how high tech companies view millenials. At the start of his capstone there was little research about millenials, and even less about millenials in high tech companies. Therefore, this graduate student used popular books about millenials to gain an initial understanding. It was especially important for him to cast a critical eye on these sources, however, as they often included hearsay, opinion, and biased assumptions.
Learning how to read, review, and use peer reviewed journal articles is an important aspect of all master’s degree programs, and the MSOD Program is no exception. Although it is fine to use newspaper articles or articles from popular magazines (e.g., Fortune, Forbes, Fast Company) as starting points to lead you to current research or experts, these articles should make up only a tiny fraction of your capstone reference list. Many of the courses in the Organizational Dynamics Program assign articles from Harvard Business Review. HBR articles are popular articles; they are not peer reviewed, and they do not contain reference lists. However, they often provide a valuable overview of current research that is going on, and a search of the author’s recent publications can often lead you to the substantive peer-reviewed articles the authors have written.

Step 4 - A Format For Your Literature Review

There is no formula for developing a format for your literature review; instead it involves thinking creatively and critically about your focus, what the literature is telling you, and the goals of your capstone research. Having said that, there is one major format that your literature reviews should not follow. A literature review is not an extended book report in which you list articles or books that you have read and summarize each of them briefly. This practice not only deadly boring, but it completely bypasses your critical thinking capacity; no one should be subjected to reading this type of horrid and high schoolish format for a literature review. With that warning out of the way, there are many different formats to choose from.

The place to start is with your research question(s), hypotheses and the goals of your capstone. What are you trying to understand, examine, critique?

The design adage “form should follow function” can be your guide. It may be helpful to think of the literature review as telling a story (see Appendix B for a fuller description of the ways a literature review is analogous to a story). What type of story does your literature review need to tell, given your research question(s), hypotheses and goals of your capstone? Here are some examples of the types of stories your literature review could undertake:

☐ The literature review could focus on the recent developments in the field you are examining (e.g., if you are looking at women in senior leadership roles in international corporations you might highlight recent research that discusses how few women are still in senior roles).
☐ The literature review could focus on recent questions raised about long-held ideas. E.g., recent research has indicated that there is no empirical evidence for the claim that 70% of organizational change efforts fail (Hughes, 2011).
☐ The literature review could focus on gaps in the literature (e.g., if you are looking at how teams function in organizations there has been little research which examines stages of team development in actual organizations).

The guide you should use in deciding on what format to use is to ask yourself, “What is the goal of my capstone?” And, “How can the literature review best support that goal?”

Perhaps an example will help flesh out the main points. Let's say you are planning to examine: “The use of blaming an individual as a way of solving an organizational problem.”

☐ First you need to define your terms. How do you define individual blame, and how are you defining an organizational problem? In addition, what constitutes a solution to an organizational problem? Oftentimes the first part of a literature review is dedicated to defining or operationalizing your terms. For example, if you are looking at millenials in the workplace,
you will need to start your literature section by defining what you mean by “millenials.” If you are examining startups you need to start your literature review by defining startups. In cases where there are many competing definitions in the literature, for example with startups or employee engagement, you need to review the main definition and then choose one to use to guide your capstone research. If there are competing definitions for a term you need to not only pick the one you plan to use, but also tell the reader your reasons for making this choice.

Since there is very little literature that directly addresses this issue (blaming individuals to solve organizational problems), you will have to look at other literatures. You might look at the psychological literature on problem solving, you might look at the various ways organizations solve problems, you might look to see if there is much literature on organizational blame, etc. Since there is not much literature that directly pertains to this issue, you will need to develop a format for your literature review that helps the reader to gain an understanding of what you are seeing as you review the literature. One way of doing this might be to organize the literature review by themes. Perhaps you find literature on the psychology of blame, literature on scapegoating in organizations, and literature on effective and ineffective problem solving methods in organizations. You might then organize the literature review with subheadings to let the reader know what you have found in a way that helps them to follow your thinking.

In this example, the last part of the literature review would be a discussion of what you found in the literatures related to your topic, how that research sheds light on your area of focus, and what common themes emerged that might guide your research. In addition, you will highlight the gaps you found in the literature.

Here is another example. You have decided to examine what makes organizational change efforts successful.

Since the literature is quite vast in this area, you will want to start by narrowing your focus. Let’s say you decide to narrow your focus by examining change efforts that are not the result of a crisis, but occur in order to prepare the organization for upcoming changes in the marketplace. You decide to narrow your focus further by just looking at companies in the financial services sector.

After you have narrowed your focus to examining financial service organizations that undertook a change effort to prepare for the future, the next steps would be defining your terms. Many literature reviews will start with a section in which the author defines or operationalizes the terms he or she is using. In this example, you would need to define what you mean by “financial services,” what is included and excluded by the term “organizational change,” and what you mean by “preparing for the future.” In cases where there are many competing definitions in the literature, for example with startups or employee engagement, you need to review the main definition and then choose one to use to guide your capstone research. If there are competing definitions for a term, you need to not only pick the one you plan to use, but also tell the reader your reasons for making this choice.

Next you need to make a decision about how to present the literature you have reviewed. Since one of your assumptions is that it is harder to catalyze people into action when there is not a crisis or impending problem (oftentimes called a "burning platform" in the organizational change literature), and since this is an emphasis of your capstone, you decide to organize the literature review around this theme. You might then discuss how most studies of organizational change examine organizations that were forced to make a change (e.g., because of impending bankruptcy, a merger, new competitors, etc.). You would support this with references from the literature. If you have found a few studies that looked at organizational change under non-crisis conditions, you would review these studies and discuss common themes. The final part of the
literature review could then be devoted to further identifying gaps in the literature, as the focus of your capstone is on filling one of these gaps.

If you capstone is focused on recent developments in the area you are examining, the literature review should focus on these recent developments. In this case you would organize your literature review so that you spend only a few pages on the background and non-current research, and the bulk of the literature review on the recent findings.

If your capstone focuses on a historical problem or issue – for example, how leadership of labor unions has changed over the last fifty years – you would need to first define why you are examining this history, i.e., the goals of your capstone. Then you would focus on the aspect of the history that is most germane to your capstone topic.

If your capstone is examining a gap in the area under scrutiny – for example, the life cycle of teams in organizations – you would need to discuss the research on teams and highlight that although the life cycle of teams has been studied, few studies have been conducted in organizations, and most have been conducted in the laboratory.

Carnwell and Daly (2001) discuss four different approaches to writing a literature review:

- "Dividing the literature into themes or categories
- Presenting the literature chronologically
- Exploring the theoretical and methodological literature
- Examining theoretical literature and empirical literature in two sections" (pg. 43).

This list is not exhaustive, but gives you an idea of four different approaches. The most important factor in deciding about an approach is to make sure that the approach you take is congruent with your research questions, hypotheses and goals of your capstone.

**Step 5 - Frame: Critical & Integrative**

Be sure to be thinking critically as you examine the articles you are reading and as you write your literature review. In writing your literature review you are not merely a reporter, describing what you discovered as you searched the research. We are expecting you to use your critical thinking faculties at all times. The bulk of your literature review should be spent in this critical thinking modality.

From a critical thinking perspective here are the types of questions we expect you to be asking yourself as you read the literature:

- What are the themes in the research you are reviewing?
- Do the themes match the problems or issues that are being examined?
- What is emphasized in the research you are reviewing?
- What types of research methodologies are used in the literature you are reviewing? Do these methodologies fit what is being examined? For example, if surveys are used to try to understand how individuals become involved in unethical organizational conduct, this is likely the wrong methodology, as it does not probe deeply into a person's thinking, conduct, and feelings.
- What assumptions, biases, and limitations are present in the literature you are reviewing?
- What is emphasized and what is missing from the research you are reviewing?
This is not an exhaustive list of questions, but it gives you an idea of the perspective or frame you need to take as you read the literature.

It is important to be aware of the difference between your opinion and your critical thinking skills. Although there are some aspects of opinion involved in critical thinking, the opinions you express as part of your critical thinking need to be supported by logic, examples, and evidence. For example, at times graduate students have expressed whether or not they liked an article, research or point of view. While what you like and dislike might be of interest to your family, friends and neighbors, it should not be part of a literature review. Whether you liked or disliked an article or research is not relevant. Here are some examples of critical thinking comments you might make about a research article:

- “The author does a good job of spelling out the limitations of the study. The author notes that the study only examined a small sample of middle managers and was further limited by the fact that they all came from one industry.” Although this statement includes your opinion (“good job”) you support it by providing examples or evidence.
- “The research goals of the study were unclear. The authors do not provide a clear research question, and do not specify the goals of the study. This is further exemplified by the lack of a clear focus in their literature review and using multiple methodologies without specifying the purpose of the different methodologies.”
- “The literature review in this study is not related to the research question. The authors review five different literatures without being clear about how they relate to the research they have undertaken.”
- “The conclusions that the authors reach do not follow from their findings. The findings are quite limited, and yet the authors argue for very broad application of their research.”
- “The research the authors conducted does not fill a gap in the literature, it does not move the research in this area ahead, and it seems to merely repeat many studies that have been done previously. The study is not a replication study, so its purpose is unclear.”

Cronin, Ryan & Coughlan (2008) advise: "Inconsistencies and contradictions in the literature should also be addressed..., as should the strengths and weaknesses inherent in the body of literature. The role of the reviewer is to summarize and evaluate evidence about a topic, pointing out similarities and differences..." (p. 43).

Above all, your literature review should be an integrated whole. Avoid at all costs the writing of little overviews of articles. Your literature review should be a discussion of major themes, trends, theories, etc. in the literature. Again, it may be helpful to think in terms of creating a story. Each paragraph should tell some aspect of your story, and together the paragraphs should form an integrated whole.

Outline of What to Include In the Literature Review

The literature review should include these essential elements:

- Introduction - In which you provide a roadmap for the reader about the focus of your capstone and what you plan to cover in the literature review.
- Background - Provide context, background information or statistics that will help the reader understand what follows. For example, if you are looking at leadership development, provide statistics on the estimated total amount spent on leadership efforts in a year, the number of schools, consulting firms, etc. who specialize in these areas, etc.
- Definitions - Define the terms you are using in your research question(s) or hypotheses.
Main Body of the Literature Review - In which you review relevant literature and tell a story which is connected to your research question, hypotheses, goals.

Gaps in the Literature - Discuss gaps in the literature that are related to your capstone.

Conclusion - Summarize key points of the literature review that you want reader to keep in mind as she/he proceeds through the rest of your capstone.

Staying Focused

Even though the literature review is a separate chapter in your capstone, it is part of the integrated whole of your document. The literature review provides background, support and compelling evidence for the importance of your capstone. If you are doing a research-based capstone, the literature review provides support for your research questions, hypotheses and goals, and provides justification for the research methods you have chosen. Without the literature review, you would be likely to go down blind alleys, repeat ideas or research that has already been discredited, or wander off into the hinterlands never to be seen again.

Essential Things To Do & Things to Avoid

Things to Do:
- Critically evaluate the articles and books you read.
- Write the literature review as an integrated whole.

Things To Avoid Doing:
- Do not string together a series of book reports, article reviews, or summaries of articles. "Care must be taken, however, that the review does not end up just as a description of a series of studies (Cronin & Coughlan, 2008, p. 42)." It also should not be a series of quotes strung together.
- Do not spend a lot of time on the background or overview of the area you are examining. Many capstone students want to show their advisor and readers how much they have read, so they cram the literature review with background articles, extraneous research and a detailed history of their topic. Focus on the heart of your topic, not adjacent areas.

Conclusion

A well-crafted literature review serves as a solid foundation for the rest of the capstone. It will help you to keep your focus on the goal of your paper, prevent you from going off on time consuming tangents, and strengthen the quality and rigor of your research. Time spent on the literature review will make an enormous difference in the quality of your work and in your completing a successful capstone.

Appendix A

Questions to ask yourself as you read articles for your literature review:

- What is the author’s frame or orientation?
- What type of article (i.e., research, literature review, secondary source, theoretical, opinion) (Collins, 2003)?
- What theoretical frame does the article take?
What is the purpose of the article (research question & goals)?
What methodology is used to gather data?
What are the major findings of the research article?
What are the outcomes of the study?
What recommendations are made? Are the recommendations aligned with the results of the study?
Other relevant information (e.g., 1st study of its kind, unusual results, etc.)
What are your key thoughts about the article?

Appendix B

It is worth explaining the ways in which I think it can be helpful to think of the literature review as a story.

1) In the beginning of a story the author sets the scene and provides background and context. At the start of your literature review you should do the same. Tell the reader what you are examining, researching, discussing. Provide background and context. For example if you are looking at employee engagement discuss how the term is defined, what research in the field has emphasized, and what you plan to cover in the literature review.

2) In the next part of a story the author develops the characters, plot and dramatic tension. In the literature review this is the part where you discuss the main research literature that is related to your capstone focus. You might organize this section thematically or along other lines depending on what you are focusing on. Continuing to use the example of employee engagement, let's say you are examining the popularity of employee engagement as a firm's competitive advantage. You could organize the literature review by examining when employee engagement started to be viewed as a competitive advantage, in what ways it has been shown to be a competitive advantage for firms, and some of the criticisms of this approach to employee engagement.

3) In a story the author is building the dramatic tension towards some type of resolution or denouement. Although your literature review may not be solving a mystery or discussing some major argument or conflict among researchers, there is still a dramatic aspect to your literature review. For example, perhaps there was a great deal of research on the issues you are examining in the 1970's and 1980's and little since. Your discussion should examine the reasons for the popularity of the research during those decades and why it has fallen off. Perhaps a theory or research focus proved to be a dead end, perhaps a researcher was discredited, etc. Another example would be the controversy that surfaced in the field of microfinance about eight years ago. Some researchers claimed that the majority of research on microfinance, which had been qualitative, was flawed and inaccurate (Bauchet, et. al., 2011), and what was needed was double-blind experimental studies to see if microfinance really produced results. This controversy included polite name-calling, aggressive statements by researchers in different camps and had all the elements of a dramatic conflict. Although it is unlikely that your area of research will have such engaging drama, it is still important to examine the tensions and conflicts in the area you are researching. This should also include a focus on the gaps in the literature in your area of focus.

4) The last part of the story is where the author provides a conclusion. In your literature review this means that you will summarize the main points of your literature review, emphasize the gaps that you encountered in your search, and discuss how these gaps in the literature can be
addressed. This section should be a clear argument and justification for the importance of your capstone, i.e., how it adds to the literature and/or research.

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