



Guiding Literature Reviews: Teaching Writing through Reading, Part II

Last month's [TWW tip](#) offered three suggestions for how to use explicit guidance with reading to support student writing. This month's tip extends the discussion by considering the literature review, an assignment that requires students to perform a number of intricate and closely related reading and writing tasks.

A Common Assignment with Common Challenges

Literature reviews offer tremendous learning potential. When done well, literature reviews can guide students to read the way you read: querying, extrapolating, scrutinizing, interpreting, and evaluating content ideas. However, literature reviews also pose a number of challenges for students across disciplines. Recent faculty assessment of undergraduate literature reviews from academic units within the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Sciences reveals students' struggles to select, summarize, and integrate sources into a meaningful whole:

- *"Students were 'stringing beads on a garland' rather than drawing conclusions or exploring critical responses, strengths, and weaknesses."*
- *"[Students] didn't seem to know how to read and understand the studies they were reviewing. In describing studies, students would say, for example, 'The results were not significant.'"*
- *"The literature reviews didn't highlight themes, offered very little framing, rendered no apparent logic, and involved tremendous redundancy."*

([WEC Ratings Reports from Summer 2016](#))

Cognitive research on writing from sources and synthesis underscores these comments. The crux of the challenge for many students is moving beyond "knowledge telling"—listing or reproducing the language, concepts, and organization of sources— and engaging in "knowledge restructuring" —interpreting and generating relationships among sources (Segev-Miller).

Beyond Bead Stringing

As earlier tips have suggested, making explicit the intellectual moves and strategies that have become tacit for experts is immensely beneficial to students. This principle applies to reading as well. Instructors can support students in the crucial shift from knowledge telling to knowledge restructuring by providing explicit guidance with reading. Here are three reading-oriented tips that support synthesis and the writing of literature reviews:

1) *Tell them What to Read For*

While literature reviews are assigned across the university, their purposes are shaped by disciplinary and/or professional interests. Three common, yet distinct, purposes for literature reviews are (1) identifying or establishing a controversy; (2) providing a current state of the field or art; and (3) exposing a gap in knowledge (Bean 243–44). Although related, each of these purposes requires students to select and read sources with different motives. Explicitly guiding students to read for controversies, best practices, knowledge gaps, or some other purpose can provide a stronger writing framework for the literature review.

Example: An instructor in Psychology assigns a literature review that requires students to identify a gap in knowledge. The instructor provides two articles related to the study of sleep deprivation on cognitive function and requires at least three additional articles selected by the students. To guide and motivate students' reading, the instructor poses the search for knowledge gaps as a vital step in developing a grant proposal to fund further research (Bean 244).

2) *Break Synthesis into Sequenced Moves*

For an effective synthesis, students must accomplish a number of cognitively demanding tasks. They must *identify* appropriate sources, *delete* redundant information, *substitute* a series of related ideas for a general one, and *construct* a unifying proposition that links sources (Kintsch and van Dijk, cited in Segev-Miller). Scaffolding and practicing activities that align with these steps can help students build toward more complex synthesis.

Example: An Assistant Professor in the Department of Soil, Water, and Climate assigns brief in-class and online activities that build toward a clear understanding of synthesis.

- *Activity 1:* Eliminate redundant information in a sample passage to create a succinct summary.
- *Activity 2:* Rewrite a sample passage so that it's a better synthesis of the ideas presented. Write 1–2 sentences describing what you think is problematic about the synthesis in the paragraph.
- *Activity 3:* Share revised paragraphs with the class. We will vote on the best revision and create a list of our own criteria of what makes a good synthesis.

3) *Process Readings Visually*

As research shows, many students lack experience with *intertextual* reading—explaining how one text's meaning both shapes and is shaped by other texts (Segev-Miller 2007). Encouraging students to create graphs, maps, or diagrams as they read is useful for visualizing a working outline of source relationships, and it can also promote the restructuring of those relationships, which is at the core of literature reviews.

Example: John Carlis, Professor of Computer Science and Engineering, encourages students to create spreadsheets to diagram the relationship of sources when preparing literature reviews. The cell values in the spreadsheet are effective in identifying how various readings (listed in rows) use related terms and concepts (listed in column headings). The denser the matrices, Carlis maintains, the richer the literature reviews.

Next semester's **Teaching with Writing Series** will feature a panel on literature reviews and a workshop on teaching synthesis. Stay tuned for more information.

Sources

Bean, John. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking and Active Learning in the Classroom*. (2nd ed.) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009.

Carlis, John. "Thinking about Literature Review/Related Work Diagrams." Handout, University of Minnesota, 2014.

Segev-Miller, Rachel. "Cognitive Processes in Discourse Synthesis: The Case of Intertextual

Processing Strategies.” M. Torrance, L. van Waes & D. Galbraith, eds. *Writing and Cognition*. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2007

Further support

See the [Teaching with Writing pages](#) on the Center for Writing website for teaching resources, including sample assignments and syllabi. As many of you know, our WAC program also hosts the popular **Teaching with Writing event series**. Each semester, this series offers free workshops and discussions. Visit us [online](#). To schedule a phone, email, or face-to-face teaching consultation, [click here](#).