So You Have to Write a Paper? Consider Writing a Literature Review

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Sue Ann Gardner, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
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A literature review is a description of the literature relevant to a particular field or topic. It gives an overview of what has been said, who the key writers are, what are the prevailing theories and hypotheses, what questions are being asked, and what methods and methodologies are appropriate and useful. As such, it is not in itself primary research, but rather it reports on other findings.
Aspects of Literature Reviews

- Literature reviews are often part of a research paper, but they can be stand-alone.

- They are usually not comprehensive overviews of a topic, but if the topic is new or obscure, it may be that your literature review will cover all relevant literature.
Why Write a Literature Review?

- It can help hone a research question

- Because a literature review is a distillation of the important topics on a subject, it is helpful for readers who don’t have the time to read all of the pertinent literature

- Because it is useful, it will tend to be highly cited
Methods

- Choose a topic
- Determine your scope
- Choose what types of sources will be valid
- If a review will be extensive, consider working with a co-author and each prepare sections
- Do not rely on quotes throughout the paper
- The review will not usually be comprehensive
- Select the most relevant, high-quality sources
- May be accompanied by a list of sources
- Use the correct style and citation format
- The paper should include analysis and synthesis
• Official publication of ALA-ALCTS, founded in 1957

• Literature reviews on cataloging and classification since 1968 (C. Donald Cook)

• One or two reviews a year through the 1970s and 1980s

• No reviews from the early 1990s the mid-2000s

• Biennial reviews again since 2007, under Peggy Johnson
February 2010, Elaine Westbrooks, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Proposals due March 2010, including letter and budget

Notified April 2010

$1,000 Carnegie-Whitney grant

Charles Wilt
ALA ALCTS Executive Director
Use of Carnegie-Whitney Funds

- Hired an assistant to compile citations
- Purchased library materials
- Purchased supplies

*Writing is an act of faith, not a trick of grammar.* --E. B. White
• **Anna Sophia Cotton**, a recent graduate of the University of Missouri School of Information Science and Learning Technologies

• Using *Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts* and Google, she compiled hundreds of citations, August-November 2010
Methods Used to Prepare the LRTS Review

- Conducted many more searches on my own, including circle searches
- Compiled papers, organized by source
- Printed many of the papers (approximately 300)
- Sorted them by general topic
- Began to read them in December 2010, and to take hand-written notes on the papers themselves
- Began writing in February 2011
- Wrote exclusively, April-June 2011
- Turned the paper in June 30, 2011 (on time)

When Shakespeare was writing, he wasn’t writing for stuff to lie on the page; it was supposed to get up and move around. --Ken Kesey
Cataloging and Classification Research Interest Group
American Library Association Midwinter Meeting
January 9, 2011, San Diego, CA

Cataloging and Classification Literature Review, 2009-2010,
Preparation for Library Resources & Technical Services:
Project Update

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/library_talks/71/
Peer-Review Process

Our admiration of fine writing will always be in proportion to its real difficulty and its apparent ease. --Charles Caleb Colton

- Heard back from the editor in August
- The reviewers suggested several changes
- Deadline of October 18 to get the revised paper back
Sources to Consult

The Literature for T. Budd at St. Lawrence University
http://it.stlawu.edu/~tbudd/litrev.html

Literature Reviews, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill
http://writingcenter.unc.edu/resources/handouts-demos/specific-writing-assignments/literature-reviews

Writing Literature Reviews, Monash University

How to Write a Literature Review, Karen Bordonaro
http://www.slideshare.net/jthiessen/lit-reviewshortversion

Know When to Use Quotations, Western Oregon University
http://go.nebraska.edu/5 [shortened link]