Literature Reviews

Goal of a Literature Review

A literature review ought to be a clear, concise synthesis of relevant information. A literature review should introduce the study it precedes and show how that study fits into topically related studies that already exist. Structurally, a literature review ought to be something like a funnel: start by addressing the topic broadly and gradually narrow as the review progresses.

Desirable Characteristics in a Literature Review

- **A clear and pertinent topic.** Ask the student how she reached her topic, why she began her literature review on the note she chose, and whether she thinks that she maintains a clear focus on that topic throughout the entire review.
- **Signs of a committed writing process.** Literature reviews are research projects. If you have a sense that perhaps the research isn't sufficient or credible, ask how the students went about conducting the research, organizing preliminary data, etc. Furthermore, encourage early and frequent writing center visits to discuss organizing principles
- **Broad base of research.** Remember: Literature reviews are information funnels. The more research the better. For each separate point, expect 3 to 7 different sources.
- **Logical cohesion and narrative flow.** A literature review is by no means a creative writing project. However, it isn't a lazy collage of "he said, she said" either. A literature review must demonstrate a logical progression. One point ought to lead very clearly to the next point, whether at the intra-paragraph level or between the paragraphs themselves. "First, second, third," won't cut it. Organization is a huge deal as is fluency of writing.

Undesirable Characteristics in a Literature Review

- **Excessive quotations.** Paraphrases are generally expected to be more common than quotations. If you are suspicious of the number of quotations, ask specifically, "Is there something about the way this passage is worded that requires you to quote it, or can you paraphrase this?"
- **Unprofessional language.** Cheekiness, cleverness, and emotional appeals are not welcome. Likewise for gender biased language.
- **Unjustified claims.** If the literature review makes speculations about the results of any given study, make sure that the writer backs up his claim with evidence.
- **Unexplained statistics.** Anytime you see numbers or statistical findings that have no accompanying explanation, ask what the author wants those numbers to indicate.

Remember: Literature Reviews are an exercise in synthesis. Make sure the writer's voice is discernible and clear.