



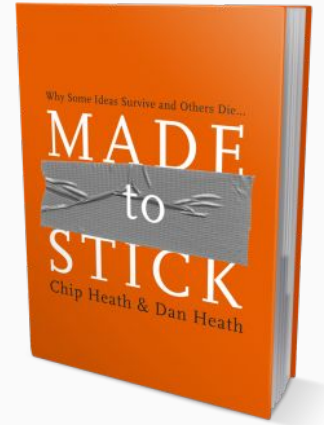
# Writing a winner PhD thesis series:

## Writing your literature review

Dr. Jay Jericho

BCom Adel, BEd ProfHons, Grad Cert Ed Tas, MEc (Hons), DSocSc Syd

# Objective



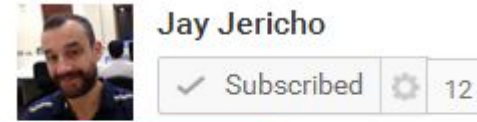
This presentation offers constructive advice to aid you to write a quality literature review chapter.

# This slideshow is one of a 12 part series



Check out some of the other slideshow presentations:

- How to ace your *viva voce* exam
- How to write a research proposal
- How to write a data analysis chapter
- How to write plan your thesis structure
- making a substantial contribution to scholarly knowledge



Quality Acrobat document versions of these presentations are at:

[www.collegeprofessor.ca/phd-writing-project.html](http://www.collegeprofessor.ca/phd-writing-project.html)

[jjericho@collegeprofessor.ca](mailto:jjericho@collegeprofessor.ca)

# 14 Points

1. Be critical
2. Analyse themes
3. Chapter structure
4. Write cumulatively
5. Synthesise the literature
6. Explore dominant debates
7. Classics and contemporary works
8. Engage with a wide body of literature
9. Don't overly focus on one work or theorist
10. Justify your selection of analytical frameworks
11. Chapter must have a single cohesive message
12. Association between your introductory chapters
13. Be explicit about how you advance the literature
14. Do not introduce new theoretical frameworks in data chapters

# Be critical of the literature

You should aim to offer a **critical literature review**. Do not offer a narrative summary of the literature. You may be critical of the literature by discussing its flaws/limitations or by offering a vigorous defence of its accuracy and relevance to your question. At all times you should relate discussion to your research aims rather than discuss the literature narratively.

Harvard University (2016), The critical literature review, <[http://sociology.fas.harvard.edu/files/sociology/files/literature\\_review.pdf](http://sociology.fas.harvard.edu/files/sociology/files/literature_review.pdf)>.

Accessed 17 July 2016.

## Example

### Narrative paragraph opening

Rawls (2001, p. 14) states that people should place themselves in the “original position” when they make decisions that impact others.

### Critical paragraph opening

Rawls (2001, p. 14) theorisation of the “original position” has strong applications for analysis in this thesis that centres on the sociology of racial exclusion and inclusion.

# Focus on themes

Organise your literature chapter around **THEMES**, not theorists or texts. Authors and texts may repeat themes and you do not want to repeat yourself. In the example (right) can you see how this **thematic** structure builds a cumulative argument in a fresh way?

## Literature review chapter example

2.1 Introduction: The focus is on **individualism**

### 2.2 THEME ONE - WESTERN LIBERALISM

Liberal **individualism** - Kant, Nozick, Rawls

Discrimination against **Individuals** - Brah, **Mayer**

Racism as **individual** difference - Jones, Kymlicka

### 2.3 THEME TWO - ANTI **INDIVIDUALISM**

Particularism - Said, **Mayer**, Benhabib

Universalism - Sen, **Mayer**, Forsythe, Donnelly,

2.4 Conclusion: Reiterate **individualism** theme

## Do not overly focus on one text or theorist

The previous slide shows discussion of **Anne Mayer's** work in three sections. This repetition of a key theorists occurs on purpose to illustrate a key argument. I posit that it is acceptable to repeat different aspects of a key **THEORIST** or key **TEXT** so long as you organise your chapter discussion around **THEMES**. **Mayer** is a key human rights theorist in the areas of particularism, universalism and liberal justice. It is difficult to locate a critical review of her publications under one thematic topic.

The example of **Mayer's** work illustrates an important general principle. You should aim to synthesise the breadth of relevant literature and not focus too much on one text or theorist otherwise your chapter becomes a summary of a theorist or text. You should aim to synthesise the breadth of literature that is most relevant to your unique research objectives.

# Be explicit about how you advance the literature

Do not be misled by the term 'literature review'. Yes, you are expected to explore (review) a body of scholarly works (literature).

Your literature review chapter must (a) offer a critical review of the existing literature and (b) at all times link this body of works to the aims of your project and (c) explain how your research project develops this *corpus* of literature.

Do not be overwhelmed by this idea that you are developing literature. Your thesis is one project that you shall conduct over a period of less than one decade. You are not expected to produce a grand body of theory on par with senior scholars who have been publishing for over a decade.

## Explicit contribution

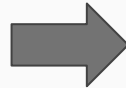
(example for illustration purposes)

**My research advances Jones's (1960) theory of structural racism which centres on America's healthcare system. I show how the same four policy factors that underpin her theory of structural racism exists in all public sector institutions in Australia during the new millennium**



# Overarching argument

Your literature review chapter must pose an overarching argument that runs throughout each sub-section. If someone asks you what is the **dominant** theme (single message) in this chapter, you should be able to answer this question in one brief sentence.



# Introduction example

## 2.1 Literature review chapter introduction

This chapter undertakes a critical literature review of human rights literature that centres on racial justice. I show how liberal notions of justice are **dominant** as they promote universalism over particularism.

# How to structure your chapter

It is possible though unlikely that the regulations that govern your thesis mandate how you must structure your **literature review** chapter.

There is no minimum or maximum number of sub-sections you must include between the introduction and conclusion parts of your literature review.

You normally need at least two subsections in order to build a cumulative argument that engages with the breadth of relevant literature. Be wary of having more than four sub-sections. Having too many sub-sections may mean that you are not engaging with the literature in sufficient detail.

You may need to use the cut-and-paste option in Word and experiment with moving your paragraphs around until you find a structure that succeeds.

# Write cumulatively



Your literature review chapter must build a cumulative argument.

Think of the sub-structures of this chapter as a rolling snowball. The baby snowball starts at the opening (e.g. 2.1). As it rolls through the discussion sections (e.g. parts 2.2, 2.3 ... *etc.*) it continues to grow until it reaches the chapter conclusion section.

## Cumulative chapter example

2.1 Chapter Opening (smallest snowball)

(Inform the reader of your overarching theme)

2.2 Thematic argument 1

2.3 Thematic argument 2

2.4 Chapter conclusion (**largest** snowball)



## Focus on peer-reviewed scholarly works

Your literature review should centre its discussion on peer-reviewed scholarly works that develop theoretical principles. These types of works include traditional written sources such as:

Journal articles, textbooks, book chapters, research papers, conference papers, and published theses.

You may also critically examine other peer-reviewed scholarly presentations such as public seminars recorded as podcasts. You need to ensure that the speaker engages with scholarly works and claims to make a contribution to the field.

The literature review chapter does not engage with all written sources relevant to your thesis. For example policy documents and legislation that impose on your research might be discussed in your introductory chapter as limiting bounds.

# Critically justify selection and rejection

Your literature review chapter is the place where you offer the most comprehensive discussion of the reasons why you have selected and rejected key **texts, themes, theories**, and **theorists** to guide the analysis of your data.

You must explicitly inform your reader of the rationale that guides your judgement. Many students find this part of their research to be the most difficult exercise. It is critical that you make the best selection as early as possible. Your choices determine the theoretical ways in which you analyse data and advance the literature to make a substantially original contribution to knowledge.

## Engage with classic and contemporary scholarly texts

You should engage with the most **relevant** mix of classic and contemporary works that aid you to pursue your unique research objective. The interpretation of this 'rule-of-thumb' is subjective. You should consult widely with others such as your supervisors and peers who research and publish in your area.

You do not need to engage with a classic work in your field just because it is widely cited. The key criteria for selection is the **relevance** to your research aims. If you reject the suitability of dominant texts, it may be wise to explicitly provide a justification of why you conclude that a work has no application in your thesis. If you do not do this, your examiner may erroneously conclude that you have not read widely.

### Classic text example

**Donnelly, J. (1982)**, Human rights and human dignity: An analytic critique of non-Western conceptions of human rights. *American political science review*, 76(2), pp. 303–316.

### Contemporary text example

**Donnelly, J. (2013)**, *Universal human rights in theory and practice*, New York, USA: Cornell University Press.

# Synthesise the breadth of relevant literature

You need to show your audience that you have synthesised the **breadth of literature** beyond those texts in your discipline that have an obvious connection to your thesis objectives.

For example, if you write about the '***sociology of race and racial differences***', the work of Jones (1960) might be an obvious first point of reference as it is a foundation work in this field.

In this example, you need to show that you have read widely in a number of subfields that have a connection to '**RACE**' and human '**DIFFERENCE**', and not just the 'racial differences' literature. Although your theoretical data analysis may only use discipline-specific methods, you may need to draw on literature from many fields to do this.

## Examples of **overlapping subfields** (c.f. **sociology of race and racial differences**)

- The **sociology of disability** literature
- **Critical race theory** literature
- **Anthropology of race** literature
- **Socio-legal studies** literature
- **Philosophy** literature
- **Cultural studies** literature
- **Bio-genetics** literature

Jones, C. (1960), Confronting institutionalized racism, *Phylon* 1960, 7–22.

# Dominant and relevant thematic debates

You might conclude that there are numerous debates that have a connection to your research question. Due to the word limit imposed you might not be able to discuss them all. It is normally acceptable to base the selection of those debates that you critically analyse on two criteria: **(a) Dominance** and **(b) Relevance**. Your audience normally expects you to review the dominant debates, even if you do not apply them to your data analysis. This discussion allows you to show mastery of the literature. These two criteria **(a)** and **(b)** may **overlap**. PhD student 'Yuka' decided to consider all debates highlighted **red (dominant)** and some of the theoretical debates shown in **blue (relevant)** due to the word limit imposed.

1. Critical race theory debates
2. **Anthropology debates**
3. Bio-genetic debates
4. **Cultural studies debates**
5. **Sociology of disability**
6. Philosophy debates
7. **Socio-legal studies debates**
8. Political science debates



# You may **advance** the literature in other chapters

A discussion of your contribution to the field may happen in any chapter of your thesis, including in your:

- Introduction chapter
- Methodology chapter
- Historical background chapter
- Data analysis chapters
- Conclusion chapter.

No two theses have exactly the same structure. For example, A PhD thesis that uses only discourse analysis to deconstruct scholarly works may develop the literature to a small extent in the methodology chapter by outlining data analysis illustration examples.

How you will advance the field in the chapters above will become clear over time as you read other theses and reflect on the unique character of your own thesis.

# Do not introduce new theoretical principles in data chapters

You must not include new theoretical concepts in your data analysis chapter that comprise a substantial framework of your theoretical analysis.

The core theoretical framework/s that you use in your data analysis chapters should be discussed in your introductory chapters such as your **literature review chapter**.

It is usually possible to appendage theoretical discussion in your data analysis chapters to complement core discussion which occurs in your introduction chapters.

It is likewise normally possible to introduce a minor theoretical argument in data analysis chapters for the first time, so long as this concept is a side issue.

As your thesis develops, it will become clear what is a 'side issue' and what is an 'appendage' of introductory discussion. If in doubt, consult your supervisor/s.

# Never delete excessive words from your chapter

Do not be too concerned about the wordcount imposed on your thesis as you write the **literature review chapter** and other chapters during the first year of your thesis candidature. You are better off writing too much than too little.

It is not uncommon for research scholars to cut-and-paste theoretical discussion about the literature between their historical background chapter and their introduction chapter as these chapters are the foundation of your thesis.

You should **never delete** large passages of text that you have written if you later conclude that these words are excess. You should cut-and-paste them to a spare workbook that contains all of your surplus words. You may later decide that you wish to reinstate these words as your thesis evolves over time.

## Further reading

Boote, D. & Beile, P. (2005). Scholars before researchers: On the centrality of the dissertation literature review in research preparation. *Educational researcher*, 34(6), pp. 3–15.

<[http://eprints.rclis.org/16929/1/diss\\_lit\\_review.pdf](http://eprints.rclis.org/16929/1/diss_lit_review.pdf)>. Accessed 17 July 2016.

Hart, C. (1998). *Doing a literature review: Releasing the social science research imagination*. London, England: Sage.

<[http://www.academia.edu/download/35996527/Doing\\_a\\_L\\_review.pdf](http://www.academia.edu/download/35996527/Doing_a_L_review.pdf)>. Accessed 17 July 2016.

This is a 249 page quality digital textbook open-access (yep, free!). I suggest that you access this text now before it disappears from public view.

Persistence,  
hard-work,  
Desire



[jjericho@collegeprofessor.ca](mailto:jjericho@collegeprofessor.ca)