

Chapter 10

Guidelines for Developing a Coherent Essay

This chapter is designed to help you refine your first draft by guiding you in developing a coherent essay. Remember that a literature review should not be written as a series of connected summaries (or annotations) of the literature you have read. Instead, it should have a clearly stated argument, and it should be developed in such a way that all of its elements work together to communicate a well-reasoned account of that argument.

✓ **Guideline 1: If your review is long, provide an overview near the beginning of the review.**

When writing a long literature review, it is important to provide readers with an explicit road map of the author's argument. This is usually done in the introductory section of the review, which should include an overview of what will be covered in the rest of the document. Example 10.1.1 illustrates this.

Example 10.1.1¹

An effective "roadmap" at the beginning of a review:

Given the adverse outcomes they expose themselves to by delaying and failing to act, why do humans so frequently engage in decision avoidance? Herein I consider a variety of choice behaviors as reflections of an individual's underlying decision avoidance, a pattern of behavior in which individuals seek to avoid the responsibility of making a decision by delaying or choosing options they perceive to be nondecisions. This review reveals that in all such cases, there is a mixture of a few good, rational reasons for avoidance and a more complex and rationally questionable role played by emotions such as regret and fear. These issues form the basis of this article: (1) the delineation of boundary conditions under which persons hesitate, defer, or choose options that require no action on their part or no change to the status quo and (2) the explanation for that behavior.

✓ **Guideline 2: Near the beginning of a review, state explicitly what will and will not be covered.**

Some topics are so broad that it will not be possible to cover the research completely in your review, especially if you are writing a term paper, which may have page-length restrictions imposed by your instructor, or an article for publication, in which re-

¹ Anderson, C. J. (2003). The psychology of doing nothing: Forms of decision avoidance result from reason and emotion. *Psychological Bulletin*, 129, 139–167.

views traditionally are relatively short. In such cases, you should state explicitly, near the beginning of your review, what will and will not be covered (i.e., the delimitations of your review). The excerpt in Example 10.2.1 illustrates application of this guideline. Note that the reviewers first provide a definition and indicate that their review includes *deceiving* and *lying* (as being interchangeable). They then state that the review will be limited to two criteria.

Example 10.2.1²

A statement of the delimitations of a review:

We define deception as a deliberate attempt to mislead others. Falsehoods communicated by people who are mistaken or self-deceived are not lies, but literal truths designed to mislead are lies. Although some scholars draw a distinction between *deceiving* and *lying* (e.g., Bok, 1978), we use the terms interchangeably. As Zuckerman et al. (1981) did in their review, we limit our analysis to behaviors that can be discerned by human perceivers without the aid of any special equipment. We also limit our review to studies of adults, as the dynamics of deceiving may be markedly different in children (e.g., Feldman, Devin-Sheehan, & Allen, 1978; Lewis, Stanger, & Sullivan, 1989; Shennum & Bugental, 1982).

✓ **Guideline 3: Specify your point of view early in the review.**

As has been emphasized previously, your literature review should be written in the form of an essay that has a particular point of view in looking at the reviewed research. This point of view serves as the thesis statement of your essay (the assertion or proposition that is supported in the remainder of the essay).

The expression of your point of view does not need to be elaborate or detailed (although it can be). In Example 10.3.1, the reviewers briefly indicate their point of view (that SES, cognitive-emotional factors, and health may be dynamically linked). This informs readers very early in the review that this overarching point of view guides the interpretation and synthesis of the literature.

Of course, you should settle on a point of view only *after* you have read and considered the body of literature as a whole. In other words, this guideline indicates when you should *express* your point of view (early in the review), not when you should develop a point of view.

Example 10.3.1³

Early summary of the path of an argument:

The associations between SES and cognitive-emotional factors have not been presented in any recent, enumerative reviews (but see the review of SES and psychiatric disorders by Kohn, Dohrenwend, & Mirotznic, 1998), and we therefore analyze this research in more detail. Following our review and critical analysis, we present a framework for understanding the pathways that may dynamically link

² DePaulo, B. M. et al. (2003). Cues to deception. *Psychological Bulletin*, 129, 74–118.

³ Gallo, L. C., & Matthews, K. A. (2003). Understanding the association between socioeconomic status and physical health: Do negative emotions play a role? *Psychological Bulletin*, 129, 10–51.

SES, cognitive-emotional factors, and health. Finally, we conclude with recommendations for future research to better address the proposed mediation hypothesis.

✓ **Guideline 4: Aim for a clear and cohesive essay; avoid annotations.**

It has been emphasized several times thus far that an effective literature review should be written in the form of an essay. Perhaps the single most reported problem for novice academic writers is their difficulty in abandoning the use of annotations in the body of a literature review.

Annotations are brief summaries of the contents of articles. Stringing together several annotations in the body of a review may describe what research is available on a topic, but it fails to organize the material for the reader. An effective review of literature is organized to make a point. The writer needs to describe how the individual studies relate to one another. What are the relative strengths and weaknesses? Where are the gaps, and why do they exist? All these details and more need to support the author's main purpose for writing the review. The detailed outline developed in Chapter 8 describes the path of the argument, but it is up to the writer to translate this into a prose account that integrates the important details of the research literature into an essay that communicates a point of view.

Example 10.4.1 shows how a number of studies can be cited together as part of a single paragraph. The paragraph starts with a topic sentence and ends with an elaboration on the topic sentence based on the citations from the literature within the paragraph. Note that one of the points made by the reviewers is supported by three references. Clearly, then, the organization of the paragraph is topical—not around the reports of individual authors.

Example 10.4.1⁴

A single paragraph with multiple sources:

At the family level, the nature of relationships between parents and children could play a role in asthma hospitalizations. Children with asthma have been found to have higher rates of clinically significant family stress as compared with healthy children (Bussing, Burket, & Kelleher, 1996). Children whose families are more cohesive are more likely to have controlled rather than uncontrolled asthma (Meijer, Griffioen, van Nierop, & Oppenheimer, 1995). Additionally, parenting difficulties early in a child's life, particularly during times of high stress, have been found to predict the onset of asthma in childhood (Klennert, Mrazek, & Mrazek, 1994; Klennert et al., 2001; Mrazek et al., 1999). Thus, strain in the family, in terms of both conflicts among family members and impact of illness on family relationships, could be associated with more frequent hospitalizations among children with asthma.

⁴ Chen, E., Bloomberg, G. R., Fisher, E. B., & Strunk, R. C. (2003). Predictors of repeat hospitalizations in children with asthma: The role of psychosocial and socioenvironmental factors. *Health Psychology, 22*, 12–18.

✓ **Guideline 5: Use subheadings, especially in long reviews.**

Because long reviews, especially those written for theses and dissertations, often deal with articles from more than one discipline area, it is advisable to use subheadings. If you decide to use subheadings, place them strategically to help advance your argument and allow the reader to follow your discussion more easily. The topic outline you prepared in Chapter 8 can help you to determine where they should be placed, though you may need to recast some of the topic headings as labels rather than statements.

✓ **Guideline 6: Use transitions to help trace your argument.**

Strategic transitional phrases can help readers to follow your argument. For instance, you can use transitions to provide readers with textual clues that mark the progression of a discussion, such as when you begin paragraphs with “First,” “Second,” and “Third” to mark the development of three related points. Of course, any standard writing manual will contain lists of transitional expressions commonly used in formal writing.

These transitions should not be overused, however. Especially in a short review, it may not be necessary to use such phrases to label the development of three related points when each is described in three adjacent paragraphs. Another problem often found in short reviews is the overuse of what Bem (1995) calls “meta-comments,” which are comments about the review *itself* (as opposed to comments about the literature being reviewed).⁵ For instance, in Example 10.6.1, the writer restates the organization of the review (i.e., this is an example of a meta-comment) partway through the document. While there is nothing inherently wrong with making meta-comments, you should avoid frequent restatements that rehash what you have already stated.

Example 10.6.1

Example of overuse of meta-comments:

Recall that this paper deals with how question asking in children has been used to explain a variety of learning styles. Also recall that we have reviewed the research on the use of question asking in the classroom and have reached some tentative conclusions regarding its conclusions. Now, we will consider two basic types of questions that young children frequently ask, noting that...

✓ **Guideline 7: If your topic reaches across disciplines, consider reviewing studies from each discipline separately.**

Some topics naturally transcend discipline boundaries. For instance, if you were writing about diabetes management among teenage girls, you would find relevant sources in several discipline areas, including health care, nutrition, and psychology. The health care literature, for example, may deal with variations in insulin therapies (such as variations in types of insulin used or the use of pumps versus syringes to deliver the insulin). The nutrition journals, on the other hand, may include studies on alternative methods for

⁵ Bem, D. J. (1995). Writing a review article for *Psychological Bulletin*. *Psychological Bulletin*, 118, 172–177.

managing food intake in the search for more effective methods to control episodes of insulin shock. Finally, the psychological literature may offer insights into the nature of the stressors common to adolescent girls, especially with respect to how these stressors may interfere with the girls' decision-making processes concerning self-monitoring, nutrition choices, and value orientations. While these examples are hypothetical, it is easy to see how such a review might benefit from being divided into three sections, with the findings from each discipline area reviewed separately.

✓ **Guideline 8: Write a conclusion for the end of the review.**

The end of your literature review should provide closure for the reader; that is, the path of the argument should end with a conclusion of some kind. How you end a literature review, however, will depend on your reasons for writing it. If the review was written to stand alone, as in the case of a term paper or a review article for publication, the conclusion needs to make clear how the material in the body of the review has supported the assertion or proposition presented in the introduction. On the other hand, a review in a thesis, dissertation, or journal article presenting original research usually leads to the research questions that will be addressed.

If your review is long and complex, you should briefly summarize the main threads of your argument, then present your conclusion. Otherwise, you may cause your reader to pause in order to try to reconstruct the case you have made. Shorter reviews usually do not require a summary, but this judgment will depend on the complexity of the argument you have presented. You may need feedback from your faculty adviser or a friend to help you determine how much you will need to restate at the end. Example 10.8.1 presents a brief summary and conclusion section that appeared at the end of a long literature review. In most cases, for very long reviews, a more detailed summary would be desirable.

Example 10.8.1⁶

A summary and conclusion section at the end of a long review:

Evidence from a wide range of psychological disciplines converges to suggest that physical and social pain operate via common mechanisms. Both were necessary to promote the survival of social animals, functioning to guide animals away from threats and toward others [who are helpful]. Both motivate quick, defensive behavior and are extremely emotionally aversive. Both types of pain share common psychological correlates and physiological pathways. Finally, both appear to prime generalized threat-response mechanisms.

In general, we believe this review contributes to the emerging notion that people's social and physical worlds are deeply entangled. We have focused specifically on how individuals' feelings for other people may stem in part from the same pain that keeps them physically safe. We also believe that social pain theory helps emphasize the vital role of connection with others in human behavior. Those of us living in individualistic societies are inundated with messages trum-

⁶ MacDonald, G., & Leary, M. R. (2005). Why does social exclusion hurt? The relationship between social and physical pain. *Psychological Bulletin*, 131, 202–223.

peting autonomy and individuality. Yet, a picture is emerging that people are so vitally important to each other that social needs are ingrained in our very biology. We hold social pain to be one such example of our deep, physical need for each other.

✓ **Guideline 9: Check the flow of your argument for coherence.**

One of the most difficult skills to learn in academic writing is to evaluate one's own writing for coherence. Coherence refers to how well a manuscript holds together as a unified document. It is important to ask yourself how well the various elements of your review connect with one another. This requires that you carefully evaluate the effectiveness of the rhetorical elements of your document that tell the reader about its structure and about the relationships among its elements. Subheadings often go a long way in identifying a manuscript's structure. Transitional expressions and other kinds of rhetorical markers also help to identify relationships among sections, as in "the next example," "in a related study," "a counter-example," and "the most recent (or relevant) study." Obviously, there are many more such examples. Remember, these kinds of rhetorical devices are useful navigational tools for your reader, especially if the details of the review are complex.

Activities for Chapter 10

Directions: For each of the model literature reviews that your instructor assigns, answer the following questions. The model reviews are presented near the end of this book.

1. If the review is long, did the author provide an overview of the review near its beginning? Explain.
2. Did the author explicitly state what would and would not be covered in the review? Explain.
3. Is the review a clear and cohesive essay? Explain.
4. Did the author avoid annotations? Explain.
5. If the review is long, did the author use subheadings? Explain.
6. Did the author use transitions to help trace his or her argument? Explain.