

The Two Faces of “The Literature Review”: Tips for Automating a Conceptual Transition

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(with thanks to Shelley Hughes)

All research projects require literature reviews, for two reasons:

- First, you have to know what has been written about a topic, and you have to have enough background about that topic and related topics to discover something new.
- Second, you need to give your readers a sense of that background, so that they see why your research question is important.

The first of these happens before you do your research; the last happens afterwards, when you write up your results.

The Problem

Too many students – and professionals!! – don’t notice that the logic of these two steps is different.

- The first requires you to read broadly. That reading is generally organized by disciplines and by authors. You want to know what various academic disciplines, sub-disciplines, and communities of inquiry have to say about a topic. And you want to know what various authors have said about it.
- The second requires you to focus narrowly. Your text is organized around your research question, not by disciplines, authors, etc.

If you write your literature review in the former style, your readers have to wade through pages and pages of arcane matter, wondering why you have included things whose relevance to your research is at least obscure, if not opaque. Literature reviews organized this way risk violating the first rule of authorship: “Don’t put your readers to sleep!” (This rule includes your dissertation committee; life is much easier if you keep them entertained.)

Software to the Rescue

While sitting in on one of Shelley Hughes’s presentations about qualitative data software programs, I thought of a way to make this transition easier. Software like NVivo and NUD*IST can automate the shift from discipline-based reading to question-based writing. Here are the steps:

1. Enter your bibliographic notes in NVivo as proxy documents, following the system that Shelley outlines in her handout, “Using NVivo for Your Literature Review”.*
2. Enter category codes as you read for discipline, author, etc. (It would probably be best to attach such codes or apply "attributes" to the whole document rather than just to a part of the note. That way, sorting on those codes will retrieve the whole thing, not just part of it.)
3. Code these same documents by their relevance to various aspects of your research question. For example, if a part of particular document is a good example of Argument “A” on your topic, give it this code. If another part is a good example of Argument “B” code it accordingly.
4. When the time comes to write up your research, make an outline of your argument, along the lines that Sara Cobb lays out in “Argument as It Bears on Scholarly Writing and Literature Reviews.*” Assign the codes that you developed in step number 3 to each step in that argument.
5. Sort your documents using these codes. This puts all the references that bear on a given step in your argument together, making it easy to choose the ones to which you want to refer.

* These documents are stored on FELIX, in my Virtual Office.