

Reflections on My First Literature Review: Lessons in Synthesis and Structure

by **Nguyen Tran Hoai Phuong**, Faculty of Languages and Cultures, Thai Binh Duong University
Email: phuong1.nth@tbd.edu.vn

Abstract:

This reflective narrative shares my early misconceptions and growth in writing a literature review. Initially, I viewed it as simple summarizing, but struggled with disorganized facts. With my professor's guidance, I learned to synthesize, organize thematically, and think critically. This shift improved my writing and research skills. The experience offers useful insights for students learning to structure and select sources effectively in their own literature reviews.

When I first heard about Literature Review, I thought it was just a fancy word for summarizing research. It seemed to be easy until I had to write an important research assignment. What I thought would be a simple task soon became too much to handle. Looking back, the challenges I encountered gave me insightful knowledge that changed my methodology for conducting research.



Like many students, I began by looking up every paper that could be written about my subject. In a matter of hours, my computer was flooded with PDFs. When I attempted to write, I discovered that I had no idea how to arrange everything, even though I felt productive. Although each paper appeared significant, I was unable to make any meaningful connections between them. Despite spending days reading, I did not get much done. I got more perplexed as I read more. In fact, I was overwhelmed with information rather than creating coherent arguments.

I was so frustrated that I turned to my professor for advice. Her advice, "Don't just collect information—connect it," fundamentally altered the way I think. I came to understand that a literature review is

similar to narrating a story, with each study serving as a component that adds to a broader comprehension of the subject. As a result, I categorized my research into key themes:

- Background studies: Investigations that offered historical background.
- Major theories: The underlying concepts that shape the subject.
- Current discussions: Research that either confirmed or refuted preexisting viewpoints.

With this structure, things started making sense. I could see patterns and gaps, which helped me create a clearer argument.



I also made the error of taking notes that were too specific. I struggled to effectively use the lengthy summaries I wrote for each paper. I eventually understood that I needed to synthesize; summarizing was insufficient. Instead of analyzing each study in isolation, I began drawing comparisons like *“Research by ... (2015) and ... (2018) supports the role of teacher feedback in improving writing skills,*

but ... (2021) challenges this by emphasizing student autonomy as a key factor”.

By making these connections, my Literature Review evolved from a simple summary of studies to a more critical and analytical discussion.

In conclusion, although it was frustrating, I learned a lot from writing my first literature review. It is more important to arrange the sources, draw connections between them, and make a convincing argument than it is to gather as many as you can.

Do not worry if you're having trouble. Use the appropriate tools, maintain organization, and concentrate on synthesis. Literature reviews are much simpler—and possibly even more fun—once you know the procedure!



Nguyen Tran Hoai Phuong is an English lecturer at the Faculty of Languages and Culture, Thai Binh Duong University. She holds a Master's in English Language Teaching and has over 13 years of experience. She teaches linguistics and ELT courses and collaborates on tourism studies with international partners.