TEMPLATE STRATEGY FOR DEALING WITH THE LITERATURE

Reviewing the literature is something that students should be doing virtually until they submit their thesis for examination. The following 4-step literature review template process is very useful for students unfamiliar with literature review as a concept or practice. Students using this tool employ standard categories across the literature they review and so can more easily compare, contrast and note the shared or different approaches taken by authors to the kinds of issues they discuss, or to the methodologies and theories they use. In this way, students can group articles into main approaches or schools of thought, demonstrating how they are providing critical commentary on the literature they’re reviewing, rather than simply reporting on what’s been written.

Using this template approach enables supervisors to:

• gauge what sense their students are making of what it is they’re reading, and
• engage in discussions focusing on the relationship of particular texts to students’ own research area

Supervisors can implement this template approach by encouraging students to:

• begin using Step 1 from the start of their project, as they attempt to become familiar with what constitutes the literature for their field,
• continue using Step 1 throughout their research project,
• begin making template entries according to Steps 2 and 3 as they become more familiar with the literature, and
• add information to the templates at any time.

Step 1: What’s in the text?
Ask your student to set-up an Excel worksheet. For each text, ask the student to fill in the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Scope</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Findings</th>
<th>Gaps</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Student summarises key points of the publication in terms of chosen categories, such as:

• research question/issue being investigated,
• scope of investigation/research (e.g. group(s) being investigated, size of sample, country or locality in which research was undertaken, etc.),
• methodology,
• theoretical framework, and
• major findings.
Students should not expect to fill all boxes on the template. They might, for example, only become aware of the theoretical framework sometime after first reading the text, once they can reflect back in the light of additional reading and increasing knowledge. They can then simply go back and add the missing information to the template.

**Step 2: How am I borrowing, building on them?**
The summary from Step 1 provides the beginning point for students’ own critical reflection on the relationship of their own project to the texts they are reviewing. In this step, ask your student to add two new columns to the worksheet; borrowing and building; and indicate the ways in which their study is borrowing from/building on each reviewed text as specifically as they can.

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By acknowledging the work of others in this way, they will be positioning their own work in relation to the literature (existing knowledge). This provides an opportunity for supervisors to have focused discussions with students on the relationship of their own research areas with what’s in the literature.

**Step 3: How am I going beyond text?**
As they become more familiar with the literature and begin to refine their own particular research question, students and supervisors can start specifying how the student’s study goes beyond or differs from what’s in each reviewed text. In this step, ask your student to add a new column to the worksheet; beyond; and fill in where possible. In doing this, students will again be positioning their own work in relation to the literature, but now also pointing to what is new and original about their work vis-à-vis the literature (existing knowledge).

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</table>
Step 4: What is the significance of my new knowledge, in terms of issue, scope, methodology, theory or findings?

As simply saying something is different from what’s already in the literature is not sufficient, students and supervisors can together explore further questions, such as:

- Why do we need this new information?
- How will it be significant?
- How might this new knowledge change the way we think about what we can read in the existing literature?
- Will the project provide new theoretical or methodological insights?
- Will it have practical as well as intellectual outcomes?
- Will it cause people to think about the issue in a new way?

Original Source: [http://researchsupervisiontoolkit.com/page/rst-ebook](http://researchsupervisiontoolkit.com/page/rst-ebook) (C3.2 Template strategy for dealing with the literature)

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**Modified Version Source:** [http://www.dissertationsupervision.org/](http://www.dissertationsupervision.org/)