



Reviews of Scholarly Literature







Reviews of scholarly literature describe and evaluate important research (“literature”) available on a topic. We consult literature reviews when we need an overview of such research. In writing a literature review, your goal is to give an overview of the literature on a topic. You do that by discussing the literature that is most relevant to your topic and your purposes, providing clear and accurate summaries of appropriate source material, and describing relationships among facts and concepts. Here is an example of a literature review that describes two methods of teaching reading. The review was prepared for the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory in 1999.

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Balanced Reading Instruction: A Review of the Literature

In the history of education, few topics have sparked such public debate as the teaching of reading. Because reading is at the heart of every child’s learning, it has been a principal educational focus for more than a century. Research on reading dates as far back as 1879, when a paper was published on eye movements in reading (Samuels & Kamil, 1984). In the mid-1960s, discussion of appropriate reading instruction gained prominence as a result of published research on models of reading instruction and comparative studies of the U.S. Office of Education’s Cooperative Research Program in First Grade Reading Instruction (Venezky, 1984; Samuels & Kamil, 1984). Both of these research efforts sparked widespread interest in all aspects of the reading process, particularly at the beginning stages of learning to read. Two basic views

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of reading instruction grew out of this activity: the skills-based approach (which emphasizes the use of phonics) and the meaning-based approach (which emphasizes reading comprehension and enrichment).

Skills-Based Approach. The skills-based approach to reading was highly influenced by the work of Jeanne S. Chall (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). In 1967, Chall discussed her efforts to identify effective practices in beginning reading instruction in *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*. She concluded that there are “consistent and substantial advantages to programs that included systematic phonics” (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Phonics is an instructional strategy used to teach letter-sound relationships by having readers “sound out” words. In 1990, Marilyn J. Adams extended Chall’s work with her review of research, *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print*. Like Chall, Adams emphasized that effective reading instruction is based on “direct instruction in phonics, focusing on the orthographic regularities of English” as well as lots of exposure to reading materials and time to practice reading (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

In skills-based learning, phonics skills are taught in isolation with the expectation that once letter-sound relationships are learned, meaning will follow. Emphasis is placed on intensive phonics instruction that is highly sequenced. Children learn letter-sound relationships by sounding out words. They learn letter sounds, consonant blends, and long and short vowels. Typically, this approach uses reading programs that offer stories with controlled vocabulary made up of letter-sound relationships and words with which children are already familiar. Writing instruction follows the same vein; children are asked to write only after having achieved mastery in basic spelling skills or when a correct model is provided for them to copy. This type of instruction was widely used in the 1960s and 1970s and today is being promoted as part of the back-to-basics movement.

Meaning-based approach. The meaning-based approach to reading was highly influenced by the work of Kenneth S. Goodman (Samuels & Kamil, 1984). Goodman was a leader in the development of the psycholinguistic perspective, which asserts that readers rely more on the structure and meaning of language rather than on the graphic information from text. He and others also noted that literacy development parallels language development. Goodman’s work in miscue analysis



and reading process had a tremendous impact on reading instruction, especially with early readers. (In miscue analysis, children are observed while reading orally and observers note where the children substitute words, make additions or omissions, or change the word order. This information is used to determine the strategies that children are using in their reading and to help develop ideas for remediation.) Goodman developed a reading model that became known as the whole-language approach. This approach became popular in the 1980s and has continued through the 1990s.

In contrast to the emphasis on phonics that is promoted by the skills-based approach to reading, the meaning-based approach to reading emphasizes comprehension and meaning in texts. Children focus on the wholeness of words, sentences, paragraphs, and entire books to derive meaning through context. Whole-language advocates stress the importance of children reading high-quality children's literature and using language in ways that relate to their lives, such as daily journals, trade books, letter writing, and writing workshops. Word-recognition skills are taught in the context of reading and writing. Comprehension takes precedence over skills such as spelling. In fact, invented spellings are encouraged when younger children are learning to write their own stories. Children learn phonics skills while they are immersed in reading; they learn to decode words by their context. Whole language also offers a supportive and tolerant atmosphere in which children learn to read.

A common but mistaken view is that whole-language and skills-based instruction are dichotomous. Many educators believed that the whole-language approach would enable children to learn to read and write naturally without direct instruction if they were immersed in a literacy-rich environment (Manzo, 1999; Sherman, 1998; Routman, 1996). Some teachers erroneously interpreted this idea to mean no phonics. However, whole language was never intended to exclude phonics (Sherman, 1998; Routman, 1996). In fact, the teaching of skills in context is one of the key characteristics of whole-language education (Weaver, 1995). Instead of being taught in isolation, skills such as grammar and spelling are embedded in whole-language reading and writing activities and are based on the words that children encounter. In this framework, skills teaching arises as a result of children's needs: meaning and comprehension are emphasized (Strickland, 1998).



For years, the works of skills-based and meaning-based researchers were pitted against each other in a media war over the best way to teach reading. Now is the time to find resolution. Recent research, such as *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), confirms that the teaching of reading requires solid skill instruction, including phonics and phonemic awareness (awareness of the separate sounds in words), imbedded in enjoyable reading and writing experiences with whole texts to facilitate the construction of meaning. In other words, balanced reading instruction in the classroom combines the best of phonics instruction and the whole-language approach to teach both skills and meaning and to meet the reading needs of individual children. In this combined approach, notes Diemueller (1996), "children are explicitly taught the relationship between letters and sounds in a systematic fashion, but they are being read to and reading interesting stories and writing at the same time."

The current revival of phonics as the cure-all to all reading problems is not the answer to improving reading skills. "Phonics should not be taught as a separate 'subject' with an emphasis on drills and rote memorization," notes the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1996). "The key is a balanced approach and attention to each child's individual needs." In order to accomplish this goal, teachers must keep in mind several key points, notes Strickland (cited in Sherman, 1998): First, teaching phonics is not the same as teaching reading; phonics is merely a tool for readers to use. Second, reading and spelling require much more than just phonics; spelling strategies and word-analysis skills are equally important. Third, memorizing phonics rules does not ensure application of those rules; teaching children how to use phonics is different from teaching them about phonics. Fourth, learners need to see the relevance of phonics for themselves in their own reading and writing.

References

- Adams, M. J. (1990). *Beginning to read: Thinking and learning about print*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
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- National Association for the Education of Young Children. (1996). *Phonics and whole language learning: A balanced approach to*



beginning reading <<http://ericps.crc.uiuc.edu/npin/respar/texts/home/phonics.html>>

Samuels, S. J., & Kamil, M. L. (1984). Models of the reading process. In P. D. Pearson, R. Barr, M. L. Kamil, & P. Mosenthal (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research* (Vol. 1, pp. 185–224). New York: Longman.

Sherman, L. (1998, Fall). Seeking common ground. *Northwest Education Magazine* <http://www.nwrel.org/nwedu/fall_98/article2.html>

Snow, C. E., Burns, M. S., & Griffin, P. (Eds.). (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Strickland, D. S. (1998). *Teaching phonics today: A primer for educators*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Venezky, R. L. (1984). The history of reading research. In P. D. Pearson, R. Barr, M. L. Kamil, & P. Mosenthal (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research* (Vol. 1, pp. 3–38). New York: Longman.

The writer begins by establishing a context for the discussion and then focuses on her topic: the controversy between phonics and whole language methods of reading instruction. She defines each method, summarizes the most important literature, and then evaluates the role of each method in reading instruction today. Writing for an audience of educators, she follows APA documentation style. (Because it was written in 1999, its documentation of Internet sources does not include retrieval dates, as would be required now.)

Key Features / Reviews of Scholarly Literature

Careful, thorough research. A review of scholarly literature demands that you research all the major literature on the topic—or at least the major literature available to you, given the time you have.

Accurate, objective summaries of the relevant literature. Readers expect a literature review to objectively summarize the main ideas or conclusions of the texts reviewed.

Critical evaluation of the literature. A literature review offers a considered selection of the most important, relevant, and useful sources of



information on its topic, so you must evaluate each source to decide whether it should be included and then to determine how it advances understanding of the topic.

A clear focus. Because a literature review provides an overview of your topic's main issues and explains the main concepts underlying your research, it must be carefully organized and clearly focused on your specific topic.

A BRIEF GUIDE TO WRITING

Considering the Rhetorical Situation

- **PURPOSE** How much information should you provide to explain the scholarly context of your research or argument? What is your primary goal? To show your expertise on the topic? To inform your readers about the literature on a particular topic? To support a topic proposal?
- **AUDIENCE** How much do your readers know about your subject and its scholarly literature? Will you need to provide any background information? What documentation system will your readers expect you to use?
- **STANCE** What is the appropriate tone for your purpose and audience? Do you need to demonstrate your authority? make difficult material accessible?
- **MEDIA / DESIGN** Are you planning to deliver your review in print or online? If you deliver it online, will you provide active links from your review to online literature?

Generating Ideas and Text

Start early. Selecting, reading, and understanding the most relevant scholarly literature on a topic require time and effort. This is one assignment not to put off until the last minute.









Choose a manageable topic. Decide what aspect of your topic you're going to research. If you're researching a topic with a vast literature, you'll need to narrow and define the topic to one you can handle. However, you'll also need a topic for which adequate research is available. The narrower your topic, the easier it'll be to do a comprehensive review. After you've done some research, **CLUSTERING** the various facets of your topic may help you narrow your focus.

Survey the literature. Begin by reading—abstracts, first and last paragraphs, charts and graphs—to help decide what's important and what isn't. Look for repeated references to certain studies: the ones that get cited most are probably the most important. The advice in the **READING STRATEGIES** chapter can help you read critically, and you'll also find help in the **EVALUATIONS** chapter developing criteria for deciding what needs to be included and discussed.

Read easier literature first. Get to know your way around your topic; understanding its basic terms, techniques, concepts, and controversies will help you tackle more difficult or specialized literature.

Take notes as you read. While copying and pasting Internet source material can save time, a literature review demands that you summarize and synthesize a lot of material. Consider using a low-tech method: writing notes on 3 × 5-inch index cards, one card per source, including for each source its thesis or research question, along with a brief **SUMMARY** of its methods or approach, its findings, its conclusions, and **DOCUMENTATION** information. If you gather the documentation information now, you can simply alphabetize the cards and copy their data into your works cited or references section.

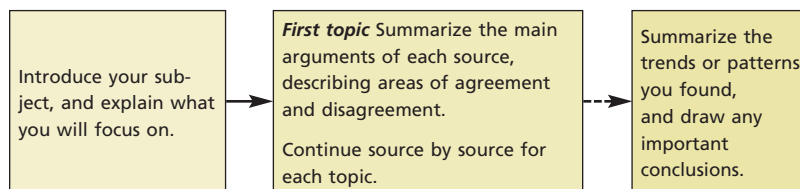
Look for any patterns, trends, controversies, contradictions. How do these sources relate to one another? to your topic? Part of your purpose in reviewing the literature is to identify important trends and issues pertaining to your topic—and to summarize such patterns in your review.

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Organizing a Review of Scholarly Literature

Reviews of scholarly literature usually organize the literature into subgroups. See Chapter 31 for help **DIVIDING** your topic into meaningful subtopics.



If You Need More Help

See Chapter 23 for guidelines on **DRAFTING**, Chapter 24 on **ASSESSING YOUR DRAFT**, Chapter 25 on **GETTING RESPONSE AND REVISING**, and Chapter 26 on **EDITING AND PROOFREADING**. See Chapter 27 if you are required to submit your review in a writing **PORTFOLIO**.