The Literature Review: Knowing Where to Stop

By Eloise Zoppos
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On a large scale or long-term project, it can be hard to know where to start, and a PhD is no exception. However, now I’m in the third year of my PhD, I have come to realise that the hardest part is actually knowing when to stop.

The ‘traditional’ model of a 3-year PhD assumes that you spend the 1st year on the literature review, the 2nd year on data collection, and 3rd year ‘writing up’. However, I found that the literature review process never really came to an end after that 1st year. Even now, when I should be writing my thesis up, the literature review process is still not completely dormant. There’s always new research, new studies, and new information to digest.

After speaking to fellow postgraduate students, I realized that this feeling of not knowing where to stop was common. I’ve come to realise that it’s okay to feel overwhelmed by the literature sometimes. At some point, however, the constant reading has to stop (or at least be paused!) for the writing to begin. So how do you learn to stop (or pause) the reading and start writing?

I see some similarities between research literature overload and social media overload. There are so many different types of social media sites available: Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and YouTube to name a few, that people have developed ‘rules’ for how to best manage the avalanche of information. Here are my top 5 guidelines for dealing with literature overload based on this advice:

1. Time: You do not always need to be connected

   Social media aficionados recommend evaluating social media on the time we spend using various sites. Scheduling social media time (for instance during the commute to and from work) is one way to make sure the day is used productively. In much the same way, we should take a step back and evaluate the time we spend on our literature review within the whole research process. Schedule reading time between other important
parts of PhD work, such as thinking, writing, and discussing ideas with others.

2. Prioritise: Don’t forget your offline relationships

Social media is meant to facilitate relationships with family members and friends. In much the same way that social media users should avoid devoting all their time to social media relationships and neglecting the real life ones, when researching, we need to take some time to remember the purpose of the literature review.

A literature review is there to produce a well-rounded PhD thesis—but it is only one part of the whole. If we fail to keep the purpose of the literature review and the end result in mind, it’s easy to get stuck feeling like you’re never going to finish.

3. Control: You don’t have to friend or follow everyone

Users of social media sites often complain about the personal, inappropriate, or just downright annoying status updates that people post. But the beauty of social media sites is control. You don’t have to friend everyone on Facebook, and it is just as easy to ‘silence’ people who talk too much. Having too many Facebook friends means that your newsfeed is constantly cluttered with meaningless information.

 Likewise, in the process of the literature review, collecting too many articles, books, or papers means that the good information can get lost. As easy as it is to get off track with new ideas and new directions, you’re only writing 1 PhD, so limit your scope accordingly!

4. Familiarity: If you’re going to use it, use it well

With the amount of social media sites out there, it’s normal for users to want to dabble in all the various sites. However, it is often recommended that users should concentrate on using their chosen site well, rather than just using every site for the sake of it.

This is a good lesson for PhD students in the writing stage of their literature review. When it comes time to write up the information you have collected, you don’t have to include every single piece of information you collected over the past 2 years or more. Focus instead on using only the key authors and the key arguments so you can critically discuss and evaluate these key pieces, instead of just mentioning them because you’ve dedicated too much time and space to less relevant material. And finally,

5. Be realistic: Anything can be overwhelming at first

It’s easy to feel overwhelmed when learning or doing something new, and with all the options out there, social media is no exception. In order to deal with this, new users should pace themselves and take a break from social media every once in a while.

Whether it’s a cup of tea, a walk, or even just getting away from the computer, escaping and recharging can be vital to feeling in control again. This is true for new researchers during the literature review stage—and in fact, is one of the most important points for the whole PhD process in general!

In the past 2 years, I’ve found that the difficulties of the literature review process are often underrated in discussions of completing a PhD. It’s easy to let the I-have-to-write-90,000-words anxiety take over! I found that thinking about the research and literature review process in this way made the whole process seem a LOT more manageable—I hope you do, too.

Need Writing Assistance?

Contact Diane or Susan via email: soswwritingsupport@gmail.com