

How do I...

MANAGE THE FLOOD OF LITERATURE I'M DROWNING IN?

One of the more challenging aspects of thesis writing is managing the volume of literature we read. The wide reading that occurs in the early stages of a new research project yields more material than can be practically incorporated into our writing, and typically opens up new areas or lines of inquiry we hadn't anticipated. This can make the initial scoping of the literature an uncertain, and at times, overwhelming process. However, basic organisational skills and reflective tools can go a long way to addressing these issues.

Below are a few simple strategies to help you orient yourself in the reading process.

ESTABLISH A REFERENCE DATABASE

It is helpful to coordinate your reference library with a clear and consistent note-taking system. Some people choose to store their notes and reflections within the reference program itself. Others choose to keep these in a separate format (e.g., word documents, written journal). Some tips on notetaking:

- Include the full bibliographic details of the text and page references for any important points or quotations.
- Document your thoughts and reflections on texts in addition to any information collected from them. You can do this while reading or shortly afterwards. This will help you to remember how you felt and responded to the text when notes are revisited further down the track.
- Each time you read something new, remember to add it to your reference library. This ensures references are not lost and that information you may need to find at a later stage in the writing process is easy to locate. You might like to store your notes in the library too.

MAP THE LITERATURE

One of the best strategies for taking a big picture view of the literature is to create a mind map. As a format, mind maps help us to organise the information we've collected visually and spatially. They're loose enough to accommodate the chaotic, messy nature of first thoughts, but structured enough to allow a sense of order to emerge organically.

Mapping the literature involves creating a visual diagram of your field. From this, it is easier to see what belongs to, and falls outside, the scope of your project.

- Write your thesis topic or research question in the middle of the page.
- Around this, note down the key fields or subfields that your project draws on, or contributes to. You might like to divide the page into sections, or use overlapping or concentric circles to indicate different areas or strands of research.
- Start to add specific pieces of literature to these areas (e.g., books, journal articles, thinkers, key themes or debates).
- Then, looking at the map, can you see a hierarchy or logic among the sources? Which are the most important texts for your thesis? What areas of research or thinkers/debates are less important? What is the relationship of your project to the various elements mapped?

Once you can clearly picture the field in relation to your question, it is easier to discern what is important to your project and what is not. This is critical to knowing where and when to stop reading and collecting information.

Your literature mind-map will change throughout the thesis. It's a good idea to revisit this exercise every six months or so.

LINKS

Mind mapping and brainstorming:

emedialib.rmit.edu.au/learninglab/content/mind-mapping

Zotero: zotero.org/

Mendeley: mendeley.com

Endnote: endnote.com/

Paperpile: paperpile.com/

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How Do I...? Guidelines are produced by the Graduate Research Development team for graduate research candidates. They provide succinct, user-friendly advice consistent with best practice and MQ Policy and Procedures at the time of writing.

FIND OUT MORE

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