

# The Thesis Writing Process and Literature Review

From Splattered Ink Notes to Refined Arguments

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# Overview: Thesis Structure

- Introduction
- Literature Review
- Hypotheses
- Methods
- Results
- Conclusion



# Today's Focus

- Introduction (in short)
- **Literature Review**
- Hypotheses (in short)
- Methods
- Results
- Conclusion
- **+ Overall Writing Strategies and Your Questions**

# Why am I writing a literature review anyway?

## Three Key Reasons (and One to Avoid)

### ○ DO

- (1) To identify a puzzle or problem in the existing academic debates.
- (2) To motivate a research question that helps to address this puzzle or problem.
- (3) To ultimately show where you make a research contribution (i.e., to show why we should care about your new findings and argument).

### ○ DO NOT

- (1) Summarize all related papers and works written on your substantive topic!



## What does this mean in practice?

- First, consider the relevant literatures on which you intend to draw.
- This is not simply all substantively related work.
- So how to know what to select?
- **Think about how each subfield of literature relates to your project.**

# Primary Categories of Literature that Relate to Your Thesis

*There are three basic categories of literature that you'll likely draw on:*

- (1) The literature(s) from which you develop the theoretical/empirical puzzle that drives your research question.
- (2) The literature(s) on the substantive case/data you're examining.
- (3) The literature(s) you draw on to make your theoretical contribution (i.e., how you explain your findings).



Let's consider what each of these means...

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# Literature for Your Theoretical/Empirical Puzzle



- Ask yourself: What puzzle or paradox emerged from my reading that I want to explain?
- This is a difficult, but extremely important step to be clear about.
- This will ultimately determine the literature that you extend and to which you make a contribution.



## SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES TO ORIGINAL SLIDES:

(1) Your puzzle may arise from competing theoretical arguments, competing empirical observations, *or* a theoretical argument at odds with an empirical observation. The example that follows does the latter, but you could successfully frame your project in any of these ways.

(2) Beyond thinking of a puzzle, you may also consider research gaps to justify your project. In doing so, you need to be clear about why this addition is theoretically important.

# Example of a Theoretical/Empirical Puzzle

*Drawn from Turco (2010), American Sociological Review*

## Some Scholars

Theorize that tokens in the workplace experience isolation and obstacles to advancement. They attribute this to the the tokens *low numbers* and *low status*.

*(Theory)*



# Example of a Theoretical/Empirical Puzzle

Some Scholars	Other Scholars
<p>Theorize that tokens in the workplace experience isolation and obstacles to advancement. They attribute this to the the tokens <i>low numbers</i> and <i>low status</i>.</p> <p>(Theory)</p>	<p>Find that same low status groups have different experiences across contexts and different low status groups have different experiences in the same occupation.</p> <p>(Empirics)</p>

This puzzle leads to your research question and clarifies which literature(s) you should draw on at the beginning of your literature review.

# Example of a Theoretical/Empirical Puzzle

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**Research Question**  
What explains tokens variable experiences?



# Example of a Theoretical/Empirical Puzzle

- The key here is to focus first on the literature relevant to the puzzle.
- *In this example, the tokenism literature sets up a puzzle derived from a theory and contradictory empirical evidence.*

Let's consider what each of these means...

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- (2) The literature(s) on the substantive case/data you're examining.
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## Substantive Case/Data Literature

- May or may not be the same literature you're drawing on to motivate and frame the research question.
- Often, this literature—if different—will be less fundamental than the puzzle/framing literature.
- You want to discuss aspects of this literature that:
  - Help to establish this case as a good (or even the best) way to examine your research question.
  - Provide details about the substantive case/data that relate to the theories you're examining.

# Example of Using Substantive Case/Data Literature

- Let's return to Turco's tokenism example we were discussing.
- Substantive case to address question = leveraged buyout industry (LBO).
- What does Turco need to tell us about LBO in the literature review?
  - In sum, the characteristics that fulfill the criteria she wants to test.
  - The literature on the case should not overpower the paper/thesis...you don't want the thesis to seem that it's about something that it's really not.



## Let's consider what each of these means...

- (1) The literature(s) from which you develop the theoretical/empirical puzzle that drives your research question.
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# Literature for Theoretical Contribution

- This is your “new thing.”
- Your theoretical contribution will be the main lesson readers take away from your thesis. You want to make sure that you’ve thoroughly read and clearly explained this contribution.
- While it’s new to explaining your particular outcome, the ideas typically develop from extant theory. This is the literature you want to draw on to help you explain your outcomes (or anticipated outcomes).
- You’ll also use this literature to develop your hypotheses.



# Example of Incorporating Theoretical Contribution Literature

Link your theoretical explanation and related literature to the original literature you used to frame the study.

*For Turco:*



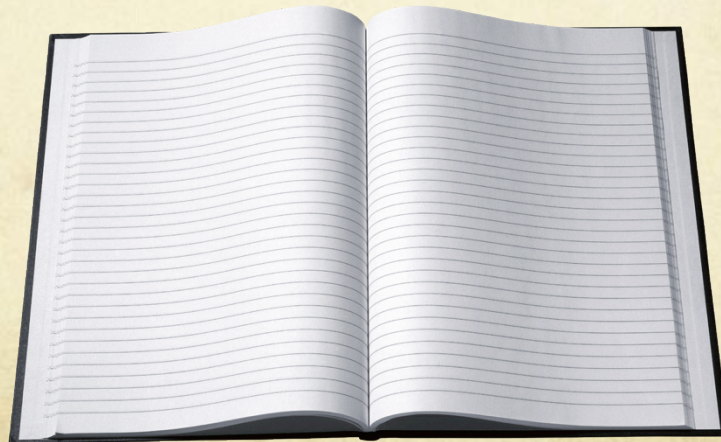
**Occupational Culture**

- hierarchy of cultural resources
- image of ideal worker

**Effects of Tokenism**

# What are examples of addressing various literatures from your own theses?

Note to those who didn't attend the workshop: Here I worked with each student to think about the different categories of literature they may use—and how—for their specific projects.





# Strategies for Finding Literature in Your Areas

- Identify the seminal and central works in your literatures—especially those motivating your puzzle.
  - *Annual Review of Sociology* articles can be extremely helpful!
  - Searching top sociological journals
    - *American Sociological Review*
    - *American Journal of Sociology*
    - *Social Forces*
    - Also, top subfield journals (check w/your advisor)
  - Citation counts for rough approximation of importance of the work
  - Google Scholar for an early and broader check
  - Various search engines – e.g., EBSCO

# Making Sense of Literatures to Write the Review

- Take notes after each article.
  - What should you include?
    - Abstract
    - Motivation, problem addressed, core question
    - Theory to explain outcome
    - Your critique
    - *If theoretical*: Note the key aspects of the theory and how they differ from previous work.
- Take notes on the connections between articles.



# Questions to Ask

- Who is in conversation with whom?
- What are the main points and key assumptions?
- What are they debating?
- What evidence exists to support or question their arguments?
- What do we gain from each perspective?
- Where can you add something to the debates?

# Important Considerations

- Whether your sources are current
  - Include seminal early pieces, but make sure you're current on the debates.
  - Look at more recent work citing these works (e.g., Web of Science).
- In writing the review, chronology is often important.
- Capture the essence of the works you draw on.
  - See Turco's "Token Theory" section.
  - Provide supporting quotes when necessary.
  - Avoid citing aspects of the works that aren't central (common mistake!).



# General Strategies

- Develop sophisticated time management practices that leave time for drafts! You cannot sneak by with one or two drafts as you might with a regular class paper.
- **One main reason = Your theory will evolve. It's an iterative process.**
- You can address this by writing consistently.
  - Stories from your data, framing of your study, ideas about your theoretical contribution.

# General Strategies

- Keep in mind from the beginning what you want to leave the reader with.
  - Someone should be able to capture the takeaway—your “new thing”—in 1-2 sentences.
- Thus, be careful with subordinate questions. Make sure they closely link to the main question, as the answer to this question will be your primary contribution.
- To accomplish the goals above, develop subheadings within chapters. These will guide not only the reader, but also your own thinking as you write.



# A few final words about the Introduction

- I've been stressing the importance of situating your work theoretically, but...
- Your project should also have social significance that appeals to non-academics, as well.
- The early part of the introduction provides an opportunity for you to capture your audience and tell them why they should care.
  - Recent current events, trends, anecdotes.
- Serves as the blueprint for your thesis. Attempting the introduction will make your thoughts very clear (similar effect as the prospectus).

**Work hard and feel free to be in touch!**

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