

## **Reflecting on Einstein's advice: a personal journey in creating an experiential approach to the development of undergraduate literature reviews.**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper presents a framework which supports undergraduate students undertaking a literature review and has been used to good effect over the last three years. The framework divides the task of writing a literature review into seven steps which if followed will guide the student through the process; a task that many undergraduate students find challenging and stressful. By providing this support the framework also alleviates the demands upon the project supervisor and reduces tutorial fatigue.*

**Key words:** literature review, undergraduate, experiential learning

## Introduction

The following article is an attempt to present a logical, systematic approach to the development of undergraduate literature reviews so that these are undertaken in an experiential manner which focuses the student upon 'doing' (Race, 2014) rather than 'knowing'. This approach is based upon my own experience of academic writing and is a method that I have used to good effect for many years and has proven particularly helpful in managing my time when undertaking my doctoral thesis whilst also working fulltime. I have now used this approach within my undergraduate project tutorials over the last three years; with students providing largely positive feedback as to its effectiveness in helping them construct their own literature review. In fact it has proven to be such an effective form of scaffolding that I now use it with undergraduate assignments and post-graduate dissertations.

## The evolution of the 'seven step' process

The reason I first decided to develop (what I eventually called) the 'seven step' approach can be traced back to the time when I was first employed in higher education in October 2001. The semester had started two weeks previously and I was given three modules to teach and fifteen undergraduate research projects to supervise. As you might imagine my main concern was with developing material for the lectures and I looked at the project supervision as some welcome relief to lecturing large undergraduate modules. However it was during these tutorials that I was first faced with what Hart (2003) refers to as an 'annual ritual' in which students repeatedly ask; "What is a literature review?", "What does one look like?" and "how many books and articles do I need to use?" Little did I know in 2001 that these questions were to revisit me time and time again like distant relations on Boxing Day. The faces of the students changed but the questions remained the same, year after year.

Despite my flippancy, this "annual ritual" (ibid) was evidently stressful to the students who wanted to succeed in their level 6 research project and it increasingly became a source of frustration as I attempted, largely unsuccessfully, to answer their questions. It also led to a number of the students to reject the research project and opt to graduate with an 'ordinary' degree. Despite this overarching stress and anxiety there were tutorials in which I felt energised and seemed to be able to explain what to write in a concise and succinct manner. However there were many other occasions when this was far from the case and I became increasingly frustrated by my inconsistency to communicate what actually is a relatively straightforward academic exercise. This inconsistency together with the energy that I was investing within my explanations meant that in 2012 I felt that I had no choice

other than develop a much more concise, coherent and consistent approach within my tutorials.

When thinking about how to develop this 'new approach' I came across a book called "Making Learning Happen" by Phil Race (2014). In chapter one Race refers to two statements that were made by Einstein which seemed particularly relevant to my task. He states; "everything should be made as simple as possible but not too simple" and in the second Einstein reminds us that "it is madness to keep doing the same thing and expect different results" (ibid, p.2). The later seemed to particularly resonate with my desire to develop a new approach to the development of undergraduate literature reviews. In his book Race also highlights the dynamic nature of learning believing that students "learn by doing" (ibid, p.19). He stresses the need for teachers to continually think about how learning occurs suggesting that people become good at things by 'having a go' and that too much time can be spent on pre-planning and (over) thinking. He states; "For effective learning to be taking place doing needs to be linked to making sense or getting ones head around it" (ibid, p.41).

I believe that this focus upon 'doing' is particularly relevant in this context as the language used within research methods text books can often be inaccessible and/or inappropriate to a majority of undergraduate students with the author (inevitably) writing from a position of 'knowing'. This can be seen in the following explanation.

"The resultant literature review should be a piece of discursive prose not a list describing or summarising one piece of literature after another. Finished, organise the literature review into sections that present a thematic overview or identify trends in relevant theory." (Taylor & Proctor as cited in Burton et al, 2008, p. 37)

The use of this type of formal academic language may make sense to those experienced in writing, but less so to anxious undergraduate students.

As a result of this I developed a seven step process which I (ironically) refer to as 'Wiseman's seven steps to success' (Table 1). These stages attempt to break down the writing process so that students focus upon one stage at a time and are therefore not overawed by the challenge of devising and undertaking their own independent review of literature. Each stage is self-contained and encourages the student to focus upon one stage at a time in the knowledge that if they do this they will have a review which is based upon a selection of relevant and appropriate literature. Students are also encouraged to set strict deadlines for the accomplishment of each stage and to focus upon work for short periods of time over extended periods with rewards being embedded at the end of each stage.

Some of the stages are very brief so the reward should be appropriate to the effort required. These rewards are identified by the students and I take no role in this but I suggest that the reward provides a period away from the writing process such as a night at the cinema or simply a night away from academic work so that they return refreshed to the writing process. I feel that this reward system is an important part of the process as it makes the students visualise a positive aspect of their independent research project and builds a sense of confidence as they report feeling a sense of satisfaction knowing that they have achieved another stage on their way to the development of their literature review. The student therefore feels increasingly confident and happy with themselves; leading to a more assured piece of work that they may otherwise have produced. The seven step process is presented in the table below.

**Table 1** 'Seven steps to success'

<b>Steps</b>	<b>Process</b>
Step 1.	<p><i>Identify topic/ issue/key words:</i></p> <p>Following the development of an appropriate title and set of Research questions, in discussion with your supervisor, identify the key words that you will use to search for relevant literature.</p>
<b>Reward</b>	
Step 2.	<p><i>Conduct a literature search:</i></p> <p>Using the words identified in step 1 conduct a search of literature ensuring that the date and source are appropriate. Consider using relevant policies and reports that may not come up in the university's database. Once identified print off and if appropriate sort articles, policies and reports into relevant areas.</p>
<b>Reward</b>	
Step 3.	<p><i>Note and bullet point (The most time consuming stage):</i></p> <p>Identify the time period over which you intend to complete this stage and select the number of articles you intend to read and note per day then read and note each article taking care to make note of the</p>

	<p>name and author of the article. Identify relevant quotes, themes and ideas. Also add you own comments and ideas from reading the text.</p>
<p><b>Big Reward:</b> <i>You have now finished to bulk of the literature review. Well done however the following stages will decide the overall quality of the review.</i></p>	
<p>Step 4.</p>	<p><i>Copy and paste:</i></p> <p>Once you have typed up the notes that you made in step 3 you now have to group together the quotes, notes and ideas around different themes and concepts. In order to do this you will have to re-read you notes and look for headings that may link your bullet points e.g. effects, causes, similarities, differences, similar research etc. Leave a one line gap between each of your identified sections.</p>
<p><b>Reward</b></p>	
<p>Step 5.</p>	<p><i>Join up ideas and remove bullet points:</i></p> <p>At this stage you have read around your topic and have a much better awareness of the literature than you did in step 1. In step 4 you have also started to structure by ordering the sequencing of the themes you have identified. These do not have to remain static and can be moved and reordered at any time. However in this section you need to begin the process of removing the bullet points and developing coherent sentences and paragraphs. Try to develop the notes you have made by identifying similar and contrasting points of view and feel free to follow your instinct of developing themes and ideas. Remain focussed upon your title and RQ's. Try not to spend too long on this section and simply concentrate on turning your bullet points into joined up sentences.</p>
<p><b>Reward</b></p>	

Step 6.	<p><i>Making sense of your work:</i></p> <p>Your review should now be looking like a piece of extended academic writing however it is still only in draft form. Simply start at the beginning of the review and read it as though you are reading it for the first time. Concentrate on its overall coherence: does it follow a logical structure?, are the sections linked?, where could and should you insert sub-headings?, are all sections relevant?, are there any gaps that need filling?</p>
<b>Reward</b>	
Step 7	<p><i>Edit, edit, edit:</i></p> <p>This section is one that is often overlooked but if done properly it can have a significant impact upon your overall grade. Read through your work again and focus on your spelling, use of grammar and referencing.</p>
<b>Well done you have finished your review</b>	

## Conclusion

The 'seven step' approach was never intended to be a panacea for all the difficulties that students face when writing a literature review and it is not intended to be a "How to..." guide either. This is not a dumbing down of the process but rather a way of conducting tutorials in an effective manner which takes attention away from worries, fears and rushed explanations. Instead what I hope to capture here is an experiential process in which the students are able to focus upon the content of the literature from the beginning rather than engage in an endless prevarication as to; what a literature is?, how to write one and how many sources are necessary?. It is as Race (2014, p.19) advocates an encouragement of 'learning through doing' rather than a 'paralysis by analysis'. However this process is not purely for the students benefit and having used it for the last three years I have found that it has ensured that I maintain a consistent approach to the advice and guidance I provide students within my tutorials which has significantly reduced the impact of tutorial fatigue that we all face with ever increasing groups sizes.



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