

**ENGL 5331**  
**MILTON**  
Spring 2002

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Purpose:** The purpose of the literature review is: 1.) to give you the opportunity to familiarize yourself with recent scholarship on your topic; 2.) to help you fine tune the topic of your research paper; and 3.) to help stimulate your thinking about the thesis of your own research paper. The basic idea is to see how other scholars have approached your topic so you can draw on and, ideally, contribute to their experiences.

**Directions:** Find 5 articles that are relevant to your research topic. Resist the temptation to pick the first five you come across; rather, try to find five articles that you believe are important and helpful. If possible, I will draw your attention to research that you absolutely, positively must know. You can also include books in your literature survey, but you will probably only want to focus on a particular chapter or section. If you need help determining the worth of a particular article or book, please ask me.

Read the articles carefully at least twice. Some articles are fairly clear and straightforward; others will be more complicated and even obscure. A solid understanding of the author's argument will make it easier to write the literature review, and should help you formulate your own argument more effectively.

Once you have a good grasp of your articles, you can begin working on your *evaluative* summary. For each article, you will need to address the following questions:

1.) *What is the thesis of the article? What point is the author trying to make?*

To answer this question, you will need to provide a brief paraphrase of the author's topic, thesis, and ultimate payoff. If the article has an abstract, you can probably find most of this information here. Don't spend a lot of time regurgitating the nuances of the article—just quickly give an account of the big picture. (If an article does not appear to have a point, it probably isn't worth using.)

2.) *How well does the article make its case?*

How convincing is the article? What kind of support is offered? Is the article speculative or far fetched, or are the claims well substantiated? If you are new to the topic, making this kind of assessment may be difficult. But try to make an evaluation based on the case presented and your own experience reading the article.

3.) *How does the author's argument relate to your own project?*

How useful is the article? Did it help you narrow your topic? Did it provide possibilities for new directions for your research? Did it provide useful context? Did it offer any promising leads? (Always look at the Works Cited and Bibliography to get leads for promising primary and

secondary resources.) Are you planning on challenging the author-s claims in your research paper, or will you use the article to bolster your own argument?

Once you have answered these questions, you can start writing the paper. To avoid just slapping together several paragraphs with little or no coherence, try to generate an overall thesis or argument that helps pull the articles together. Is there some common assumption or argument that all of the articles address? Is there some aspect of the topic that all of the articles focus on? Do the articles form some kind of conversation (i.e., are the articles in agreement or are they contentious)?

In terms of length, you are basically looking at a 7 paragraph essay (introduction, one paragraph per article, and a conclusion). If some of the articles are very closely related, you may want to address them in the same paragraph. But, to do this paper well, you will probably need to write between 5 and 6 double-spaced pages.

**Format:** In the upper left-hand corner of the page, supply the following information (single spaced, on separate lines): your name; section (ENGL 5331); my name; date. Double space and provide the title (centered, double spaced, without quotes); double space again and begin the text. The text should be double-spaced, left-justified, with 1 inch margins on all sides. Choose any appropriate (i.e., readable) font; the type size should be 12 pt. or 10 pt.

**Conclusion:** A literature survey is an important part of any serious research project. (Typically, the first chapter of a scholarly book acts as a literature survey.) To make a convincing argument, you need to prove to your reader that you understand both the primary texts and the scholarly concerns surrounding them. A solid grasp of secondary scholarship will also help you avoid Reinventing the wheel,<sup>6</sup> and should help you generate lots of ideas for your own research paper.