

# Literature reviews

## ANU Academic Skills



# Purpose

Justify your aims and approach, and persuade readers of your argument

Positions your study in relation to previous scholarship

Demonstrate the importance of your topic and research

Show you're up-to-date


Provide relevant background



Present an argument about why your study is worthwhile



Draw together key problems, themes, concepts, theories etc. essential to your research



Show what is known and where there is agreement



Analyse the strengths of the literature



Highlight the limitations, areas of disagreement, gaps or problems that your study aims to resolve

The production of new knowledge is fundamentally dependent on past knowledge. **Knowledge builds**, and it is virtually impossible for researchers to add to a body of literature, if they are not conversant with it. Put simply, working with literature is an essential part of the research process... **It generates ideas, helps form significant questions, and is instrumental in the process of research design.** It is also central to the process of writing-up; a clear rationale supported by literature is essential, while a well-constructed literature review is an important criterion in establishing **researcher credibility.**

# Skills in writing literature reviews



# Types of literature reviews

## Traditional / Narrative

- Organised by themes you have found in the literature (your analysis)
- Demonstrates gaps in the literature
- Author selects material to include
- Useful for a thesis, journal article introductions

## Scoping review

- Try to find all the literature with few restrictions
- Aimed to synthesis knowledge and identify gaps

## Systematic literature review

- Answers a specific research question
- Quantitative analysis of the literature
- Identifies key themes and gaps
- Comprehensive compilation of available evidence
- Outlines methods including search strategy, criteria and data extraction methods. These need to be replicable.
- Assesses the quality of the evidence
- Provides clear conclusions
  
- Barrier: need multiple authors to reduce bias

# Planning a literature review



Map the debate and determine scope and delimitations





# Key questions to guide your research

What is the nature  
and state of  
knowledge on my  
subject?



What do I think  
about it all and  
why?



How will my study  
contribute to  
developing that  
knowledge?

# Scoping and focusing the literature

## Coverage

- What bodies of literature do I want to get into and why?

## Depth

- How much detail do I need to provide?

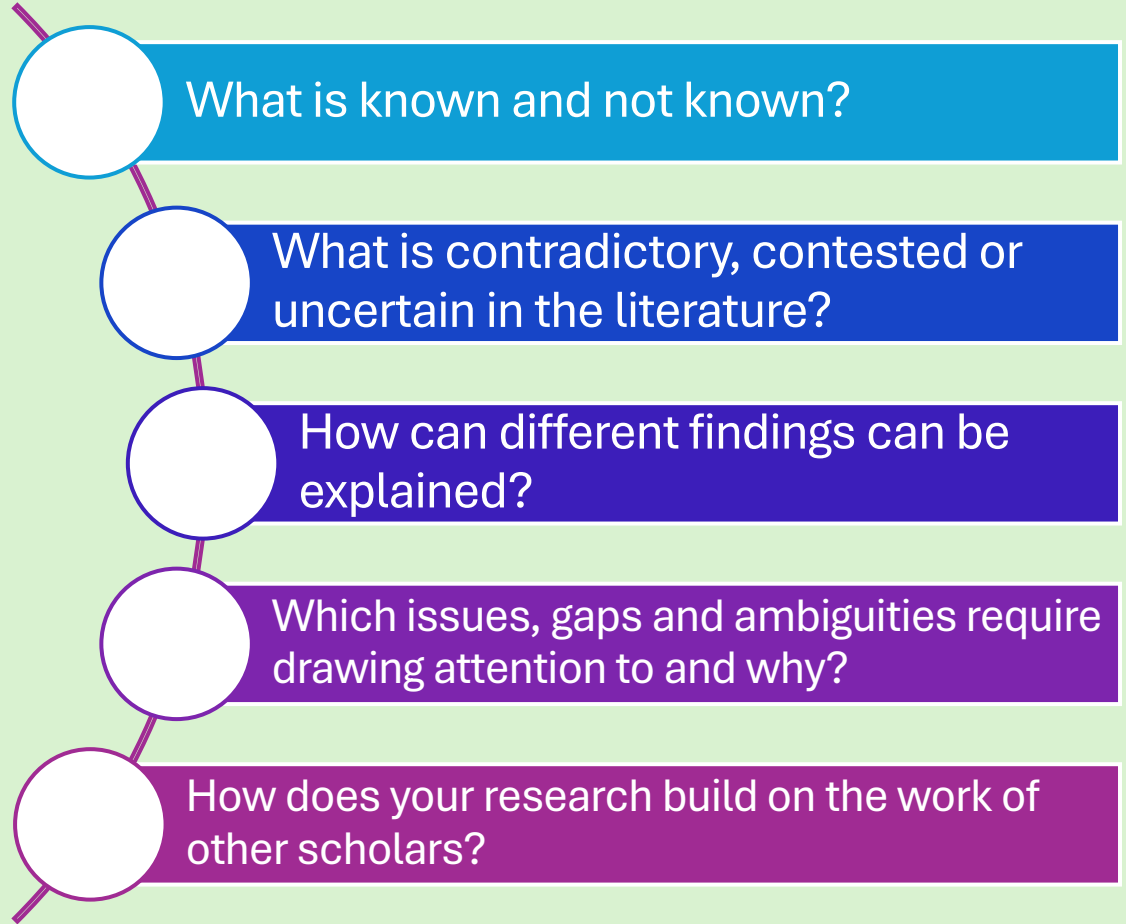
## Structure

- What is the relationship between the different sources? How do I convey this?

## Research Gap/Argument

- Where do I fit in relation to them?

Remember to  
develop  
arguments  
based on your  
critical  
analysis of the  
literature



# Managing your sources

Bibliographic details	Aims	Findings	Relevance to my study	Study design	... relevant topics

# Using critique tables

This forms the basis of what goes in the lit review



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<b>Claim</b>	<b>Evidence</b>	<b>Evaluation</b>
Kovac et al. (2009) forwards the idea that increasing economic power distance between the rich and poor could be the main reason for differences in violent crime rates.	Cites Smith (2007) who looked found a strong correlation between Gini index (a measure of economic disparity) and violent crime rates globally.	The correlation found by Smith (2007) is indeed strong, though the validity of the Gini index and violent crime measures could be a problem. Different countries may report these things differently, which means an apples-to-apples comparison is not really possible. This being said, Kovac et al. (2009) made their argument in a speculative fashion, and this seems appropriate given the doubts about the consistency of the evidence.

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Consider drawing your structure

Make sure it facilitates drawing out your **research question(s) or focus** rather than being an annotated bibliography or a textbook entry.

## Chronological

History

Development of Ideas

## Thematic

Issues

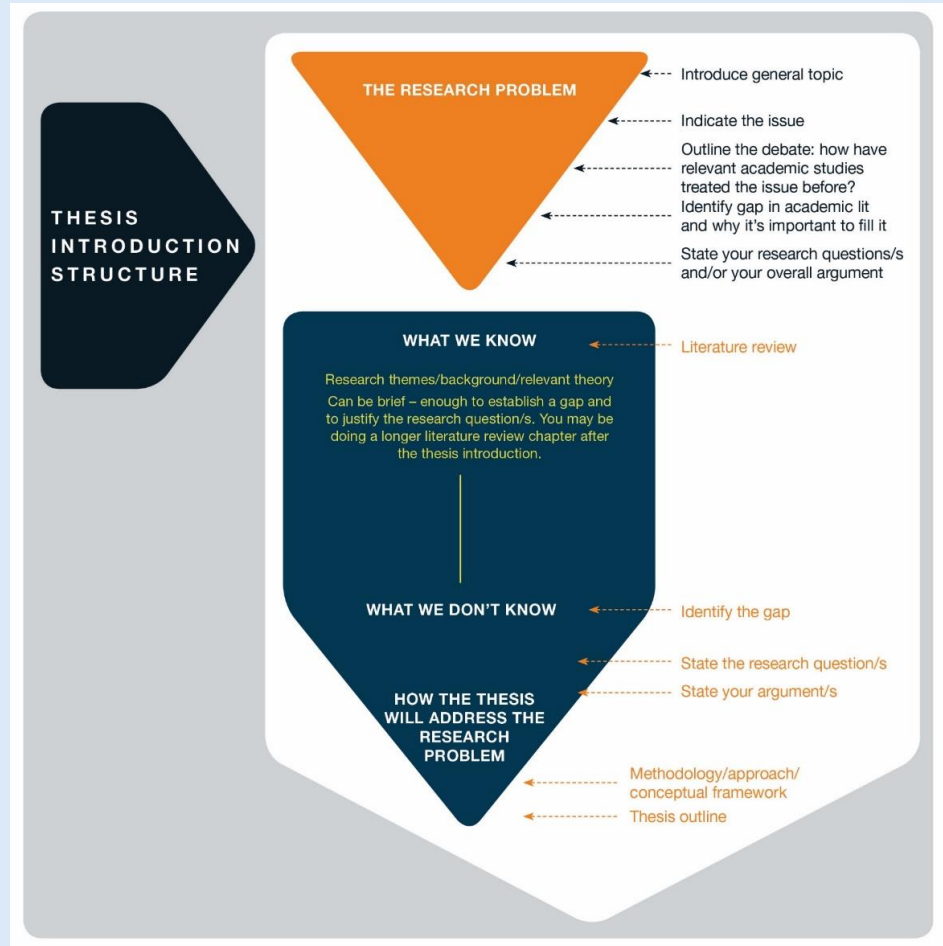
Concepts

## Methodological

Theories

Frameworks

# Literature review placement in the thesis introduction



# Structuring your literature review

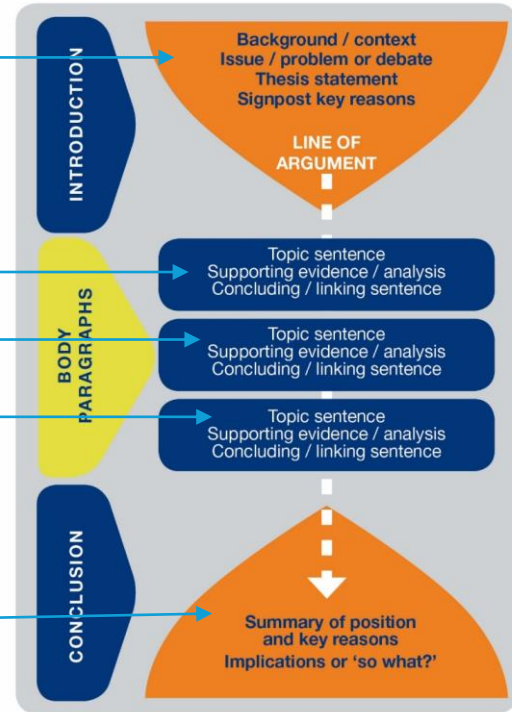
Overall argument/key message

Theme/main point 1

Theme/main point 2

Theme/main point 3

Summarise and so what?





# The literature review justifies your RQs



Introduction and key message

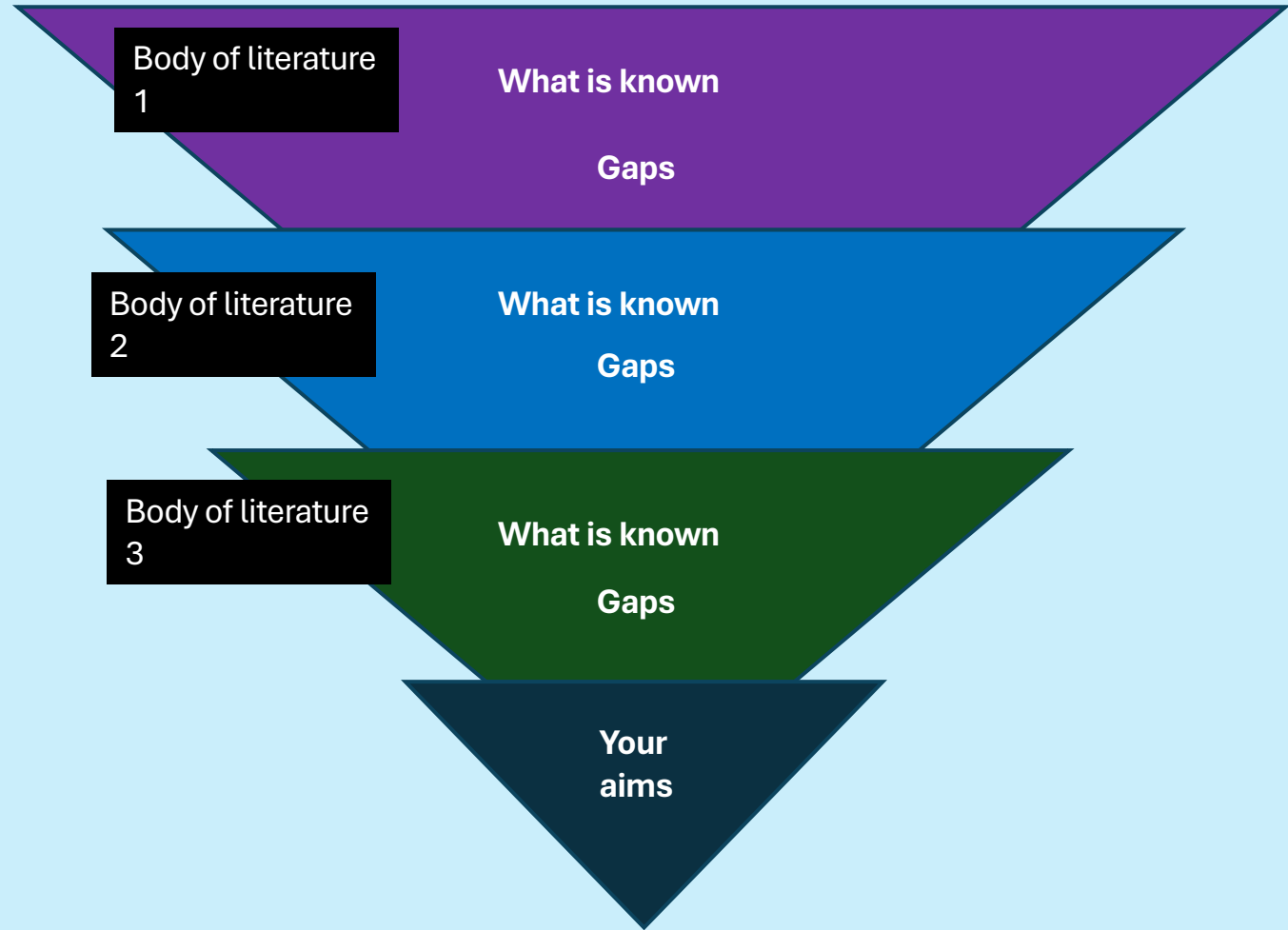
What we know

What we don't know

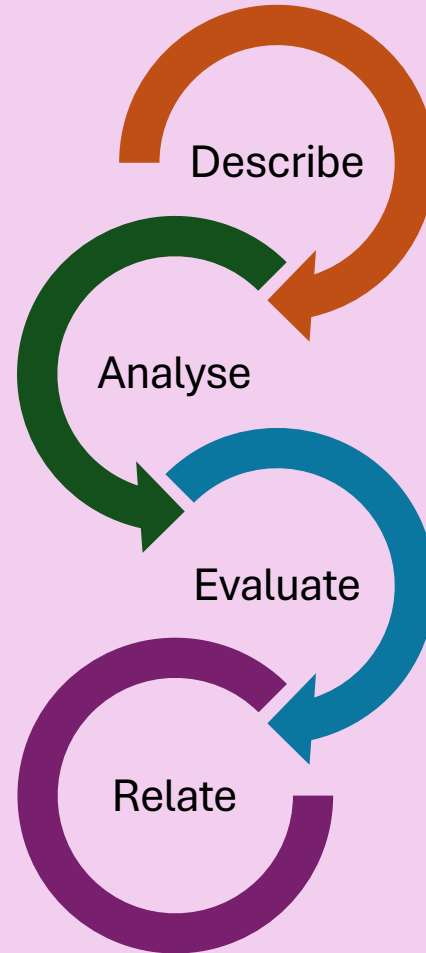
Gap

Aims /  
RQs

- Dealing with multiple bodies of literature



# Writing your review with critical engagement



# What is the author's argument?

- What did the study set out to do? What was the research aim or question?
- What did the author find?
- What conclusions did the author arrive at? Why?



# Closely examine your sources



- What aspects are most relevant?
- What reasons and supporting evidence does the author provide?
- What criticisms or reservations do you have?
- What are the strengths of the study?
- Are there any limitations?

# Analysing Texts

- These are some questions that you might want to ask yourself when reading a text and analysing it/critically engaging with it for your research:
- Audience: For whom is this text intended?
- Use: What could this information be used for?
- Significance: Why is this text important? What does or could it add to discussions in your field? Which issues, gaps, ambiguities, unresolved problems, etc are raised in or by this research?
- Value: Does this text offer a particularly intelligent and complex argument, a useful update to earlier editions, or an exceptionally clear, detailed, or comprehensive treatment of its subject? Why or why not?
- Reliability: Is this an original source, an accurate testimony, a well-researched and logical argument, etc?
- Theory: Does this text use – or is it influenced by – a particular theory? What are its underlying assumptions? What methodology does it use?

# Evaluate overall effectiveness of relevant studies



- Do the strengths of each study outweigh the limitations or vice versa? Why?
- How persuasive is the author's argument?
- What is the relationship of the source to other critics?

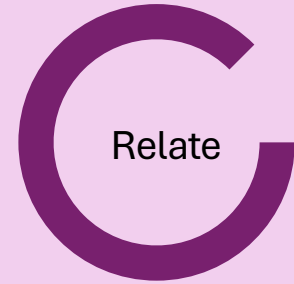
# Don't just summarise, synthesise!

- Identify similar studies and/or contrasting studies
- Plot the relatedness of information:
  - Where is there agreement?
  - What are the authors' different viewpoints?
  - How can these differences be explained?
- Tip: look for relationships and contradictions between different sources/ideas





# Position your study



- Where does your study fit in the debate?
- How are the studies that you cite relevant to your own?
  - What particular studies / methodologies / research are you basing your own project on? Why?
  - How does your study address a key limitation?
  - How does your study extend existing research?
  - Where does your study depart from the literature? (i.e. what's new or novel about your project?)

# How do you write about the literature?

- Move the reader through your structure/narrative
- Group thinkers/concepts together where possible
- Don't get stuck on unnecessary detail
- Make clear your position in relation to the literature discussed



# Writing your literature review

- Make statements about the **importance** of the topic/issue for your field
- Show what has excited scholars/practitioners/policy makers in the area of research:
- Show what it all means for your research: stress what is new or different about your study and your contribution to discourse/ knowledge



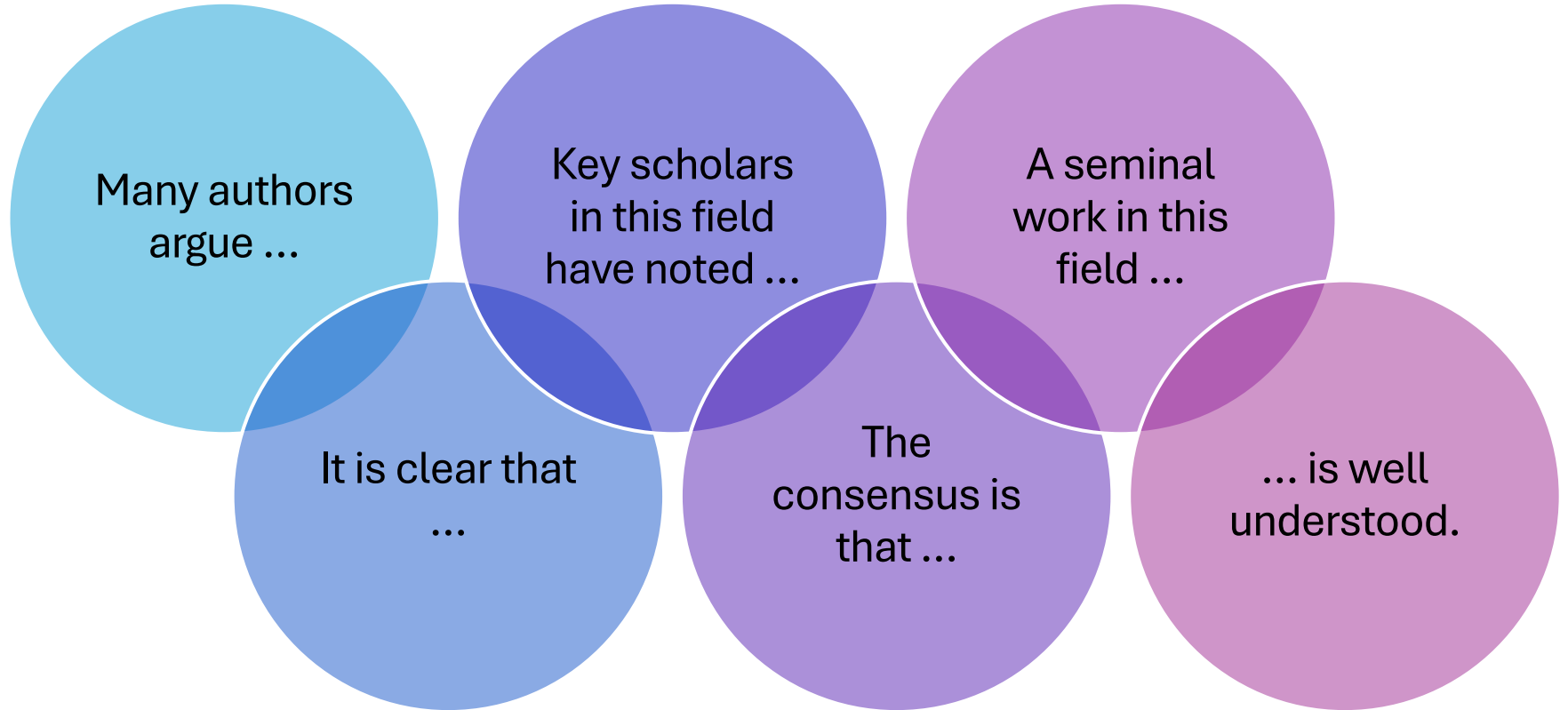
# Use critical engagement phrases



- Summarising main themes and arguments
- Highlighting issues relevant to your research
- Critiquing the literature
- Positioning your research in relation to the literature (GAP)

<http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/>

# Knowns



# Gaps, uncertainties, problems

Despite the importance of ... there are few studies on ...

... continues to be debated

Attempts to ... have been unconvincing because ...

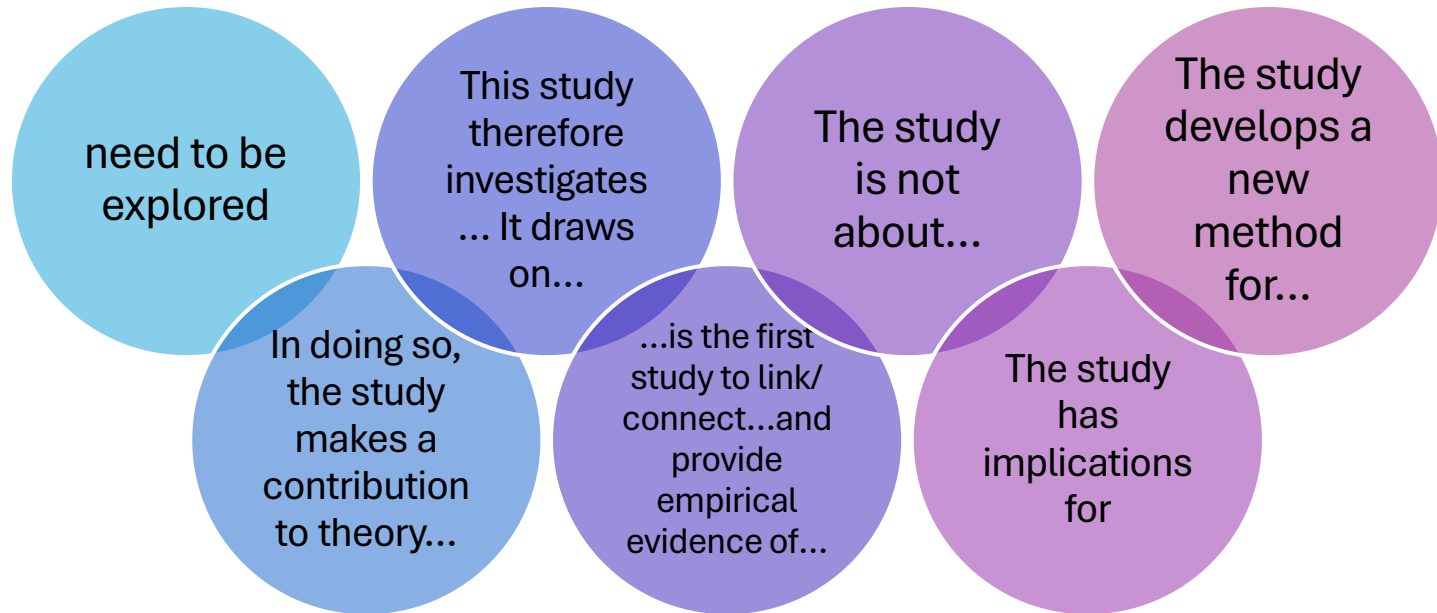
While studies have addressed ... X has been overlooked

The reason ... is unclear

The uncertainty surrounding ... shows that there is a gap in ...

Despite these recent advances ...

# Implications and where the study fits/ contributions to knowledge /defining scope and delimitations



# Linking and transitional words

Function	Vocabulary
Introduce an author's quote or perspective	According to, As noted by Solomon comments, states, highlights, believes, observes ... etc.
Add information	In addition, Furthermore, Moreover, Firstly, Secondly
Express similarity	Similarly, Likewise, Equally
Express difference	In contrast, However, Meanwhile, On the other hand
Demonstrate cause and effect	Therefore, Consequently, As a result, As a consequence, Due to
Introduce evidence/examples	For example, For instance, To illustrate
Finish discussion	In conclusion, To conclude, Finally, Ultimately, In summary



# Voice – yours vs others



- Make sure the reader knows when you are paraphrasing source material and when you are interpolating your own comments.
- Your argument needs to be clearly distinguished from that of the paper you're reviewing

# Final tips



Have questions to guide you

Use literature as a resource for your argument

Don't be afraid of counterarguments

Know when it's time to *stop reading!*

# Useful sources

- [Academic Skills Appointments](#)
- [Academic Skills Research writing](#)
  - [Literature reviews](#)



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# THANK YOU

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