What is a Literature Review?

So you get to write a literature review. Great, what the heck does that mean? "Literature" in this context has nothing to do with fiction. In an academic context, the word "literature" can collectively refer to the existing research on a particular subject. As in, "What does the literature say about the mating habits of fruit flies?" The word "review," thankfully, means what it sounds like: to examine and evaluate.

With those definitions in mind, a literature review (or lit review, if you're in a rush), is a critical evaluation of the research on a particular topic. That definition is kinda crucial, so I'll say it again. A lit review is a critical evaluation of the research on a particular topic. You may have had to evaluate sources before in an annotated bibliography, but those are lists of citations that describe and evaluate each of your sources individually. Lit reviews are different. For one thing, lit reviews never take the form of a list. Not ever. Instead, a lit review should be a synthesized analysis of sources.

So, synthesis. Don't worry, that's just a fancy word for pulling different things together and making sense out of them as a whole. Here's the difference between a list and synthesis. This is a list: eggs, sugar whipping cream, butter, flour. A bunch of raw materials. And this is synthesis: cake. The combination of raw materials for a specific purpose. But here's the crazy part-- I could have made something else using those same ingredients.

Lit reviews work the same way. Instead of eggs and flour, your raw materials are books and articles. Instead of breakfast you get a synthesized analysis. Now here's the tricky part. In baking, the recipe determines the ratio of ingredients and how they're handled. In a lit review, it's your perspective.

For example, you can look at your sources from a chronological perspective, and produce a lit review that explains how the research has changed over a period of time. Or you could take a thematic perspective, and explain how a particular aspect of the research has been treated. A perspective can be pretty much anything you decide to focus on. Most of the time, though, lit reviews are written to identify and describe gaps in the research, places where an enterprising scholar can do some useful work.

Perspective guides what lit reviews focus on, but lit reviews are written for a bunch of different reasons, and come in a variety of sizes. These things can be book chapters, stand-alone articles, or an introductory section of an article that shares the results of an empirical study. No matter how long or short they are, though, they are always cohesive pieces of writing, containing a synthesized analysis.

Lit reviews serve a valuable purpose. You might have heard a variation of a statement made famous by Isaac Newton: "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." In a nutshell, this explains human progress. It's why you don't carry around a live coal in a little box to help you start the nightly fire that will keep you from freezing to death as you hike across the tundra in pursuit of woolly mammoth. People record their progress so other people don't have to solve the same problems. It's a lot easier to put a robot on Mars when someone else already
figured out that whole "how does gravity work" thing. Today there are more books and articles being produced than ever before. That means that it takes more work than ever before to understand the literature in any given field, which you have to do if you want to contribute. Hence lit reviews.