

Argument As It Bears On Scholarly Writing And Literature Reviews

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Academic writing can be placed on a continuum of style that ranges from "slash and burn" to appreciative. The more typical is the slash and burn, and I think the more "advanced" is appreciative, so I would recommend that folks ground themselves in what Peter called the "conflict model" ("I am doing something that others have either failed to do properly," or "I am doing something that has not been done because folks saw the problem/issue in a different/wrong way). Once scholars master the accepted arguments that are made in the conflict model, they can evolve to a more appreciative mode where the argument is more inclusive ("I am extending the work of others that have pointed us all in the right direction through a new method or a new framing") Both styles are important, so although the appreciative model might feel better, it is still very important to make claims about what is wrong and why.

Good arguments are a combination of both styles. They should inform us first and foremost who else has CONTRIBUTED to our understanding of the issue, and then tell us in what way that contribution is limited or limiting (either epistemology, method, theory etc). Whatever the reason is that is given for extending the work, should open us to new scholarship that has moved in that direction (lets say they have used the advocated method) and again, the move is first to appreciate the contribution of the scholar(s) and then to address the limits of that work for YOUR project. Here is what a sketch of an argument looks like from this appreciate/address limitation perspective (BOTH OF WHICH ARE INVOLVED IN CRITICAL ANALYSIS).

The Structure of the Dissertation/Thesis Argument

Introduction:

Real world practical problem _____.
Related to lack of understanding of _____.
Increasing understanding of this problem would be good because_____.

Please note that *why* YOU care about it as an author is NOT central to the argument. Also, your description of your journey to the question is NOT the argument. Whatever attracted you to the research, personally, is NOT the argument. And as a reader, I do not care why you are interested. Boring. Rather I want to know, as a reader, about this problem or puzzle and what it will do for us, as a community, if we can address it better/more effectively.

Literature Review:

Round 1:

1. Scholars that have addressed this problem (of understanding) have said XYZ. .
2. This has helped us to understand the problem because of ABC.
3. But their frame/method/epistemology limits our understanding of the problem in the following way: DEF.
4. So we need another frame/method/epistemology to help us understand the problem, given the limits of our current understanding.

Round 2:

1. There is a group of scholars that help us move past these limits (DEF) given their focus.
2. This focus helps us understand the problem because it addresses HIJ.
3. However it delimits our understanding because it does not address KLM.
4. Writer's Contribution (at end of lit review): So I am going to address KLM.

Summary:

1. Although (Round 2#2) has helped us understand the problem, we need additional research because of KLM (in Round 2 #3).
2. I propose to do an analysis which will address KLM as it helps us understand the problem (tying the project back to the problem outlined in the Introduction).
3. Note: There may be multiple "rounds," depending on the complexity of the review.

Method:

1. Lit Review: Scholars have addressed issues like #3 (in Round 2) using the following kinds of methods:
 - a. A This one helps us because it does N, but N does not help us understand DEF
 - b. B This one is also interesting because it does M, but it is problematic or incomplete in relation to the effort to understand DEF.
 - c. C And this one is a better choice, because of O, and it helps us address DEF.
2. I will follow this person's work as it will enable me to address #3 (in Round 2)
 - a. Note: Here you might need to review the folks that have used this method, and sort it for the reader, categorizing the use of this method, noting how, within this method, there are variations and some of these may be more, or less, pertinent to your effort to understand DEF.

Discussion (Findings)

1. Findings extend and elaborate our understanding of DEF.
2. Now our understanding of DEF is augmented in the following way: QRS
3. Given this new understanding of DEF, we now can understand QRS about the problem.
4. However this new understanding does not take into consideration TUV, so the understanding of the problem is limited.
5. More research on TUV might increase our understanding of the problem.
6. What should be clear is that issue, DEF, is itself a contribution to our understanding of the problem, and that the research that was done is done on it as a way to extend our understanding of the problem.

General Comments on Argumentation

It also should be clear that there is a pattern to scholarly argument: discussion of the presence of the contribution of a given theory/method for helping us increase our understanding of something, and then a discussion of the limitations of that same perspective. Then the solution to those limitations is itself addressed in terms of what it adds (presence) and what it cannot do for us (absence). This way, each new line of research that is discussed is the Solution to the problems that are raised in the discussion of the "absence" of the previous body of research.

Then in the discussion section, the new findings should help us address what is absent in all the previously reviewed perspectives. This should be a dense and interesting re-tracing of all the "absences" in relation to your (the writer's) findings.

Implications for this model of argumentation

Summaries are essential to argumentation---they help tie limitations back to the problem and tie contributions to limitations etc. Each section of a scholarly piece should have a good summary paragraph reminding folks what we now know. This is the mortar in the bricks of your argument.

Headings help focus the reader on a new segment that is connected logically to the previous, but is a new area. These should appear with every new arena of research that is reviewed or each segment of the argument itself (in the example above it would be the various rounds, etc. Headings should be logically related to each other, in a hierarchical relation, so that the main headings subsume topics that are to be read as subsumed under that topic. Here is how they should be done according to Chicago manual of Style.

#1 Centered Underlined: Animals

#2 Centered: Mammals

#3 Left Justified and Underlined: Dogs

#4 Left Justified: Wild Dogs of Africa

#5 Indented 5 spaces, as the first segment of a paragraph, bolded or italics, followed by a period: "Matriarchy in Wild Dog Packs."

Using this notion of "argument," the lit review and the data analysis are both contributions to research, as both augment our understanding. Many of the journal articles you read will increase our understanding by review the "lit" or the issues in a new way, and never get to data or analysis. So be clear that you are doing scholarship when you use this kind of critical analysis.

Lists are logic crutches---they appear when there is no logic to string things together. While I have suggested that argue-mentation (cool huh..) is better for scholarship, sometimes you may need lists. I am just suggesting that you watch out where they show up and be curious about what they are masking in your writing.

This mode of argumentation is logico-deductive. It has been central to logical positivism. AFTER you have mastered it, you can think more freely about how the form of the writing is reflexively related to the kind of knowledge we generate, and there are other ways of writing that better fit extremely reflexive projects like participatory action projects for example. Meanwhile I strongly suggest that you master this logico-deductive model of argumentation as I am very much hoping that we can provide you skills needed to participate in scholarly conversations, including scholarly publications.