

ENG 302 – Process Paper #2: The “Literature Review”

In a very famous formulation, the rhetorician Kenneth Burke compared making an argument about anything to walking into a cocktail party an hour and a half after it’s started. All the conversations are already underway – positions have been laid out, alliances forged, and key terms and rationales established. Arguments don’t exist, Burke was trying to say, outside the context of existing discussions, and the only way to argue effectively, incisively, and thoughtfully is to reconstruct as much of the conversation as possible after the fact. To figure out who’s taken what position, why they have, and how they argue for it.

A number of genres have evolved in academic writing to perform this kind of reconstruction. Particularly accomplished researchers in given fields often prepare “annotated bibliographies” on various subjects, alphabetized lists of publications with short descriptions of the content of each. The writers of dissertations prepare “literature reviews” (reviews of the existing scholarly literature on their topic), usually as a separate chapter early in their project. Professional and business writers, too, are often asked to prepare “white papers,” documents that survey background information on a proposal or project, perhaps establishing the need for some product or for rethinking approaches to an organizational problem.

I won’t ask you to do anything so formal here, but I will ask you to do something very similar. Familiarize yourself as thoroughly as possible with the discussions surrounding your topic: do some library research, spend some time online, consult some reference sources, review the reading you’ve already done about your topic, and talk to some people you know who are informed about it (perhaps former professors). Then write a paper surveying **the range of questions asked of your topic and the different positions taken on those questions, who takes them, what interest those people seem to have in those positions, how they argue for them, who else in the discussion they’re responding to when they make their arguments, and how open or closed the discussion is to new comments** (that is, as Bitzer would say, at what stage in the “life cycle” of discussions is it?). Simply, *what are the major voices in the conversation around your topic and how do they relate to one another?* Or, in Kenneth Burke’s terms, who’s at this party, and what have they said to each other so far?

You should choose at least **four** important texts to describe here – this is the “literature” you’ll review” – and they should represent important voices in the discussion of your topic.

This is a really important sort of preparatory document for two reasons. First, it’s the only way to know what it’s possible to contribute to the topic you want to address in your major paper for the course. If you don’t know what’s already been said, you won’t know, on one hand, if you’re simply repeating something that’s already been established without moving the conversation forward or, on the other hand, if you’re saying something that’s been so thoroughly discredited that you’ll be quickly dismissed (at least if you don’t know the reasons people have argued against it). You don’t know whether it will strike people as a cliché, as outrageous, or as something in between, and you run the risk of being ambushed by arguments you haven’t thought through. Second, remember that the other participants aren’t just your competitors – they’re your audience, too. These are the people who will hear what you have to say – and some number of whom, hopefully, will find it convincing.

5 pages, conferences Wednesday, rough draft due next Monday.