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Literature Review Sample and Writing Guidelines (Master 1 Cultural Studies)

Literature Review Sample Essay

Digital Infrastructures, Power, and Cultural Memory

Recent scholarship in digital and cultural studies increasingly argues that algorithmic and platform infrastructures play a decisive role in shaping how knowledge, visibility, and memory circulate in contemporary societies. Rather than functioning as neutral technological systems, digital platforms and algorithmic tools operate within broader social, economic, and political structures. As a result, scholars emphasize that digital technologies actively participate in the production of cultural hierarchies, the circulation of information, and the transformation of collective memory in networked environments.

A growing body of research focuses on the ways algorithmic systems reproduce existing forms of inequality. Safiya Umoja Noble demonstrates that search engine algorithms often reproduce racialized and gendered stereotypes embedded in the data used to train them. Her work reveals that algorithmic ranking systems privilege dominant cultural assumptions, thereby reinforcing structural inequalities through seemingly objective technological processes. Similarly, Kate Crawford situates artificial intelligence within a broader political economy of data extraction and labor. She argues that AI infrastructures depend on extensive networks of human labor, natural resources, and global supply chains, challenging the common perception that digital technologies operate independently of material and social conditions. Together, these scholars highlight how algorithmic systems reflect and reproduce existing power relations rather than functioning as neutral instruments of information retrieval.

Beyond algorithmic bias, scholars in platform studies emphasize the structural power of digital platforms in organizing communication and participation. According to José van Dijck, social media platforms are not simply spaces for user interaction but institutional actors that shape online visibility, connectivity, and participation. Platform architectures and algorithms determine which content circulates widely and which remains marginal, thereby influencing the dynamics of public discourse. This perspective highlights the role of digital infrastructures in structuring social relations and cultural production in networked environments.

The transformation of cultural memory in digital contexts represents another important dimension of this scholarly conversation. In particular, Andrew Hoskins argues that digital media have

fundamentally altered the processes through which societies remember and archive past events. Unlike traditional forms of archival memory, digital platforms enable continuous circulation, reinterpretation, and recombination of historical materials. As memories become embedded within networked infrastructures, the boundaries between past and present become increasingly fluid. Digital memory is therefore characterized by immediacy, connectivity, and constant reconfiguration.

Taken together, these perspectives illustrate the growing recognition that digital infrastructures play a central role in shaping contemporary cultural processes. By examining algorithmic bias, platform governance, and the transformation of digital memory, scholars demonstrate that technological systems operate as powerful cultural mediators. Understanding these dynamics is therefore essential for analyzing how knowledge, representation, and collective memory are produced and contested in the digital age.

Guidelines for Writing a Literature Review

1. Start With the Scholarly Problem

- A literature review should begin by introducing the **research topic or debate**, not individual authors.
- Example structure:
- Introduce the **topic or problem**
- Explain **why it matters**
- Indicate **what scholars are debating**
- Avoid beginning with:
- "Smith argues…"
  "Jones states…"
- Instead begin with:
- "Recent scholarship on digital culture emphasizes…"
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- **2. Group Scholars Thematically**

- A literature review should **organize research around themes**, not authors.
- Common thematic structures include:
- theoretical approaches
- research debates
- methodological differences
- historical development of ideas

- Example:
- Theme 1: Algorithmic bias
  Theme 2: Platform power
  Theme 3: Digital memory
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- **3. Compare Scholars**

- Literature reviews should show **relationships between sources**.
- Use comparison language such as:
- similarly
- likewise
- in contrast
- while
- however
- extending this argument
- Example:
- Noble focuses on algorithmic bias, while Crawford expands the discussion to the political economy of AI.
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- **4. Use Analytical Verbs**

- Avoid repetitive verbs like **"says" or "talks about."**
- Stronger academic verbs include:
- argues
- demonstrates
- highlights
- critiques
- examines
- suggests
- emphasizes
- contends
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- **5. Move From Specific Ideas to Synthesis**

- Each section should end with a **synthesis sentence** that explains the significance of the discussion.
- Example:
- Together, these scholars demonstrate that digital infrastructures are deeply embedded in social and political power structures.
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- **Practical Tips**
- **Tip 1: Avoid the "One Author = One Sentence" Problem**

- Weak structure:
- Noble argues… Crawford argues… Van Dijck argues…
- Better structure:
- Several scholars emphasize that algorithmic systems reproduce social inequalities. Noble (2018) demonstrates…, while Crawford (2021) situates these systems within…
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- **Tip 2: Think of the Literature Review as a Conversation**

- Ask:
- Who agrees?
- Who disagrees?
- Who expands the argument?
- Your task is to **map the conversation**.
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- **Tip 3: Use Topic Sentences**

- Each paragraph should begin with a **clear thematic statement**.
- Example:
- Another major concern in digital cultural studies involves the role of platforms in shaping public communication.
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- **Tip 4: End With the Research Gap**

- A literature review should gradually move toward **what is still missing**.
- Typical closing sentence:
- Despite these contributions, limited attention has been given to…
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- **Tip 5: Synthesis Is the Key Skill**

- Your goal is **not to summarize texts** but to:
- connect them
- evaluate them
- position your research within them