How to do a Literature review: Frame don’t name

<http://patthomson.net/2015/05/04/literature-know-how-beware-too-much-naming-not-enough-framing/> Accessed 5/3/15

[**literature know-how – beware too much naming, not enough framing**](http://patthomson.net/2015/05/04/literature-know-how-beware-too-much-naming-not-enough-framing/)

Posted on [May 4, 2015](http://patthomson.net/2015/05/04/literature-know-how-beware-too-much-naming-not-enough-framing/)by [pat thomson](http://patthomson.net/author/patthomson/)

You’re in the middle of working with literature. You find that you have to bring several texts together and compare them. Why? Well, you might be trying to establish points of difference and similarity between several papers. Or maybe you are illustrating a chronological line of thinking, or you’re establishing a conceptual family tree. Any of these tasks requires you to engage in some textual compare and contrast.

Now, if this is what you are doing, you need to exercise a little care. The compare/contrast task has odd effects. It seems to cause some people to write prose that ranges from the clunky to the utterly unreadable. At worst, names of authors, texts and quotations are jammed together in dense, incomprehensible proximity and the reader has trouble working out what on earth is going on.

If you want to avoid producing unreadable compare/contrast texts it’s helpful to understand how and why this tortuous writing is constructed. To illustrate,  I’ve manufactured a set of dense [sentence skeletons](http://patthomson.net/2014/07/07/explaining-and-justifying-the-use-of-theory-via-a-sentence-skeleton/); that is, I’ve stripped out the content from a problematic paragraph in a draft paper that I could barely follow.

Here is the paragraph of sentence skeletons.

*According to A & B (date), Professors in … at … C & D’s argument derives from E’s view that….. In a move similar to A & B, F (date) matches
C & D’s (date) concept of … with that of G’s (date) concepts of … . Writing in (title of book) G, (date) a professor in …, states: “two line quotation” (p. ). Like C and D’s …., G’s notion of …… is…. G’s concepts of … are very similar to C and D (date) concept of … and….., “three line quotation” (p.).*

Below I’ve numbered the sentences and set them apart so that they now read like a list.

(1) *According to A & B (date), Professors in … at … C & D’s argument derives
from E’s view that…..*

(2) *In a move similar to A & B, F (date) matches C & D’s (date) concept of …. with that of G’s (date) concepts of … .*

(3) *Like C and D’s …., G’s notion of …… is…..*

(4) *Writing in (title of book) G (date) states: “ two line quotation” (p.). G’s concepts of … are very similar to C and D (date) concept of … and….., ‘three line quotation” (p.).*

So what’s wrong with this? Well for start, once you make the paragraph into [a laundry list](http://patthomson.net/2013/09/16/literature-reviews-beware-the-list/), you can see that that’s probably how it started. However, the list is only one part of the paragraph’s troubles. Let’s see what some of the problems are.

*It’s not immediately clear what the paragraph is about*. That’s because there’s **no topic sentence**.

The paragraph is actually about a concept that C and D use, and its origins. The paragraph claims that C and D developed their idea from E (according to A and B). However F says that this isn’t what happened at all – C and D got their idea from G. F produces a quotation from G as evidence to show the similarity with C and D’s.

It wouldn’t be too hard to start the paragraph with a topic sentence that read something like this:

*The source of C and D’s concept of… is contested.*

This makes it clear what the writer is going to discuss. Once the topic sentence is sorted, it could be followed by something like …

*One the one hand A and B say that it is derived from E. E wrote about …. and  ….. However, an alternative view (F date)  is that it is actually a reworking of G’s work. F for instance shows the similarity between …. and ……*

Or something similar. You get the idea*.*

We now have a clearer meaning – and in doing so we’ve got rid of every  sentence starting with an author’s name (the he said, he said list). And we’ve also eliminated the [quote dumping](http://patthomson.net/2015/02/16/thesis-know-how-beware-the-quote-dump/). But doing this rewriting means that we can now see two other problems.

*There is unexplained information in the original paragraph.* There’s some miscellaneous information about the people concerned – Professor of – and it’s not immediately clear why that needs to be there. It may perhaps signal disciplinary differences or countries of origin or periods of time, but the writer doesn’t say why they’ve put this detail in. The reader thus has no idea why this information is important. If it’s pertinent then the writer needs to provide some commentary.

But hang on, the revised version reads like it’s only half a paragraph. That’s because we don’t know where it’s going. Why does the contestation about the idea matter at all? *The point of the paragraph is unclear.* Why does the reader need to know where C and D’s idea comes from; what is it about the origin? Is it *really* important to understand the two possible sources of C and D’s idea? Does one source offer something that the other doesn’t?

The writer probably can’t answer those questions in this one paragraph. But they can do something towards an answer, otherwise the paragraph has no purpose. Even if *this*paragraph isn’t going to give the reader all of the answers to the “so what who cares” questions, the reader needs to know that there is some point in the differences of opinion. The writer has provided the evidence for their opening claim about contestation – but why???

At the very least, I’d expect there to be a last sentence in the paragraph which summarises the evidence that has been presented and provides some clue about where the argument is going. **There needs to be a concluding sentence**.

So to sum up …There’s no topic sentence, and no crunch at the end. They’ve jammed a lot of information – names, dates, quotes, locations – into a very little text. It’s this combination of **too much naming and not enough framing** that makes this paragraph difficult to understand.

*The standard paragraph structure – claim, evidence, conclusion – is missing.*

But the ultimate problem with the paragraph is that *the writer hasn’t constructed a thread through the text.*They haven’t used a meta-narrative which explains to the reader what is going on. Writ large over several pages or an entire chapter, the problem of no framing and all naming means a discussion of literature that goes nowhere, fast. The thread of argument created by those topic and concluding sentences will be missing. The overall text won’t make any sense at all. And that why getting naming and framing in balance is crucial.

This problematic paragraph is symptomatic of a writer being submerged by their literatures. They know what they want to do, but they haven’t yet got far enough away from the material to take charge of the conversation. They’ve produced some bits of text out of which an argument might be crafted, but they haven’t yet taken the leap to sort out what they want to make of their assembled bits. The writer is not yet not evaluating, arguing, telling the reader why this matters. The writer is simply reporting some differences between texts and doing so in a way that is barely readable.

And that means that the poor old reader is left to fight their way through the names, dates and quotes, and draw their own conclusions.

**Additional information**

– Some material on paragraphs [here](https://www.umuc.edu/writingcenter/writingresources/paragraph_struc.cfm)

– More about writing with literatures in:
Graff and Birkenstein’s (2007) [They say I say](http://books.google.co.uk/books/about/They_Say_I_Say.html?id=ZSnYAAAAMAAJ&redir_esc=y) and Kamler and Thomson’s (2014) [Helping doctoral students write.](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=tfkjAwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=kamler+thomson&hl=en&sa=X&ei=pqREVai-A4nTaIHKgfAN&ved=0CCEQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=kamler%20thomson&f=false)