What is a “Review of the Literature” and how is it organized?

A “review of the literature” is basically a report of what is currently known about a topic, based on the published scholarly literature. It is not the same thing as a “book review” which is an evaluative report about an individual book – rather, it takes a look at a collection of writings (articles, books, etc.) on a topic of interest and synthesizes the findings so that readers are informed about the state of knowledge relating to that topic.

When you search for information on writing a “review of the literature” on the Web, you’ll find a number of useful resources. Don’t be dismayed at the apparent scope of the project – your task in this INFO 522 project is much simpler than retrieving everything on a topic and reviewing many articles. You’ll actually be writing what we might consider a “mini-review” based on your 12-20 articles in your annotated bibliography. But the general principles are the same. A couple of useful links are:

- The University of Toronto (http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/specific-types-of-writing/literature-review) has a useful overview of the literature review.
- The Writing Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/ReviewofLiterature.html) provides some guidance on writing the literature review.

Many students (and experienced scholars) make the mistake of writing a literature review as though it were a “string of pearls” – one paragraph per article reviewed, strung together in some possibly useful order. If you think about it, this is simply a repetition of the annotated bibliography information – not a synthesis of the findings reported in the articles. It is this synthesis – a focus on the topics of the articles – that is wanted.

Here’s a way to think about the difference between an annotated bibliography and a literature review:

- Imagine a table, where each row represents a document (D) in your bibliography and each column represents a topic (T) that is discussed in at least one document.
• A “string of pearls” approach deals with the full content of each document – one at a time. This is NOT a good approach to writing a synthetic literature review (although there are many published examples that are written this way).

• A “topic by topic” approach is better. The focus is on the findings, and each paragraph or section would include discussion of all relevant articles (with embedded name-date in-text citation format). For instance, Document #1 is about topics 1, 2, and 7 while Document #2 is about topics 3, 4, and 5. Strong topic sentences for the paragraphs help and a concluding section brings together the major findings.