

5 LET'S PARTY: COMPOSING A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON A TECHNICAL TOPIC

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If you're reading this essay, then you most likely have a daunting task ahead of you: writing a literature review.¹ Rest assured that you are not alone in your apprehension or lack of excitement at the prospect laid in front of you—most writers feel the same. Parties have never been thrown for a literature review. No champagne bottles have been uncorked in its name.

It is likely that your experience in writing literature reviews to this point has been when composing that section of your research paper where all the secondary sources you found belong. You have located the requisite five sources for your teacher and now need to cite and summarize them. You dump them in the boring space of the document that exists after your clever introduction but before your savvy argument. That space might be more than boring; it might be treacherous, a place where all the MLA and APA errors live and where you feel right out of your league in being able to aptly summarize complex scholarship.

Yet, rest assured, a literature review remains a vital ingredient in the effectiveness of a given piece of writing, and it might even surprise you that literature reviews serve a critical function in technical and professional workspaces as well. Research does not end once a degree is conferred. A literature review can take many forms and can be found in a wide array of academic, scientific, technical, and workplace documents spanning all fields and disciplines. Sometimes it is the full document; sometimes it is but part of a document. From essays in philosophy to journal articles in oceanography to grant applications in microbiology to proposals in public policy to informal reports in social media marketing to business pitches in accounting, each have a type of literature review component that are connected more by *function* (what it does) than by *form* (how it is organized).

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That is, the *form* can take many shapes: A literature review can be a three-page section of an academic essay, yes, but it also can be a one paragraph overview of common platforms used by other companies in their social media marketing. It can be a background research section of a grant application for a municipal project. The *functions*, however, by and large stay the same. The goal of this essay is to examine what these functions are and, in doing so, present the case that a literature review is not supplemental but foundational to any piece of writing—including those in more technical documents.

So, actually, you know what? Let's throw literature reviews a party, after all. And let's do so by way of an acrostic (a type of verse in which the first letters of each line form a word) of five functions of a literature review, which we'll address in order, and which end with practical guidance. In terms of its functions, a literature review:

- Participates in a Conversation
- Adjudicates Sources
- Refines for the Target Audience
- Transmutes into Trust
- Yokes You to Others

Literature reviews deserve as much, given their bad rap, indeed their pivotal but thankless role in writing success. And it might make the prospect a little clearer and, dare I say, exciting.

PARTICIPATES IN A CONVERSATION

Alrigh, first things first: “literature” doesn't mean what you might think it means. In the context of a “literature review” the term means much more than just literary texts, especially those covered in English and, well, *literature* classes. In academic and workplace contexts, “reviewing the existing literature” on a topic means to account for the work on your given topic that has come before you in this current moment in time. This work can be books, of course, but also journal articles, websites, projects, funded grants, white papers, or any document that discusses the best practices of a given process. To review the literature is to acknowledge the predecessors that came before you. It is to participate in the larger conversation around the topic you are researching.

This idea of participation is key. While it may seem like secondary research is static and somewhat disconnected from your current writing

project in front of you at this very moment, discovering what research, practices, and perspectives have been established before you actually connect your work to a larger system of ideas. Discovering what has already been done by others does not subtract from the value of your work. It adds to it by linking it directly to an ongoing conversation in which you are seeking to be a participant.

Imagine showing up hours late to a party and your friends are having an unexpectedly vigorous debate. As you approach closer to the loud noise of your fiery friends you notice that they seem to be debating whether or not a beloved local coffee shop's new app allowing for online ordering is a good idea—a contentious topic if there ever was one! As you reach the circle, you apologize for interrupting with your lateness and vocalize, as a regular patron of the local coffee shop and former coffee barista yourself, that you think the new app is ridiculous and will take away the essence of the local coffee shop experience.

You even surprise yourself at how riled up you are about this topic and continue on with examples from your time as a coffee barista where you would get to know and even anticipate orders of regular customers from the moment they walked in the door. You gave examples of Julia's double mocha at eight in the morning, or Ahmad's late afternoon triple espresso on his way to his late shift. You fervently insist that getting to know customers personally is part of the coffee shop experience, and that the time spent chatting while the customer is waiting in person is a vital social event to our culture! We need to retain these coffee shops to retain our sense of community, you exclaim! The faces of your friends slowly take puzzled forms; a few even glance at each other, polite but confused. "What?" you ask. "Am I being wild? Do you all disagree with me? I'm not being radical here!"

"No, you're not," your closest friend, and now spokesperson for the group, calmly responds. "It's just that we weren't talking about local coffee shops generally and their social functions. We were talking about how everything in this world is just speeding up, and how no one has any patience for anything anymore. It's go-go-go all the time, and this new app is just one example. This conversation actually started with social media. We were a bit thrown off by your, um, statements because your story about your time as a barista was pretty deep in the weeds about coffee shops and not at all about the death of patience in our society. So, it's kinda related, but, like, not really, right?"

How embarrassing. You completely misread the conversation. You want to go back home, or at least sink into a hole in the floor, but you simply

apologize and tell yourself you're going to learn how to listen better and be less opinionated all the time. You're quiet for the rest of the night, which is probably for the best.

The party rule you broke was the unstated condition of participation in conversation: that you listen and acknowledge and *then* speak. You might feel like you have a grasp of a conversation by the last one or two things said, but without the full understanding of the conversation's starting point, not to mention the opinions of others that have been stated before your arrival, your vocalization is not really participation in the truest, most honest and productive sense of the word. You're making noise and people hear it, but it is not connected and, therefore, not really useful. Or persuasive. Or meaningful. By analogy, the literature review helps satisfy this condition. It shows that you have been paying attention, you understand the origins of the conversation, and you acknowledge and value the words of others above or at least before your own.

To improve this function of your literature review, you'll need then to conduct a thorough review of all the work that has been done and is currently being done on your topic. This ensures a more seamless entry into participation and also ensures that you are not repeating the work of others. It shows you are "listening" before speaking. This process of review must be diligent, even painstakingly so, depending on the level of depth you are seeking to achieve.

The reader has absolutely no obligation to do any research for you. You will, of course, have to draw the line somewhere—you can't research everything *ever*. So, seeking the guidance of your professor or a subject-specific librarian would be wise to help scope the breadth of the project. The type of reviewing and researching you'll be doing and the places you'll look will depend on the piece of writing you're working on. And each piece will have different places to start and different times to stop.

PRACTICE

Find everything you can on the topic, using resources around you like a librarian or professor to point you in the right direction. Create a spreadsheet—a running inventory of sorts—to archive your finds (Table 5.1).

Creating a table ensures that (a) you don't have 21 browser tabs open with important information and then lose them when your internet crashes and (b) you are thinking about how each piece of information you find—could be books, journal articles, web pieces, blog posts, or software applications—connects to your research. They could support it, challenge it, facilitate it—whatever. But listening to as many folks as you can and

learning (and remembering!) their positions on a topic is one of the best ways to have a great time at a party and avoid any social *faux pas*. Off you go to dig into the research.

Table 5.1. Source Spreadsheet for Literature Reviews

Author	Title	Publication	Link/ DOI	Reliability Rating (1 to 5)	Main Argu- ment/Find- ings	Connection to Your Project
...

ADJUDICATES SOURCES

Whew! That was a lot of sources. You have currently . . . let's see . . . 5 . . . 10 . . . 17 sources! Great work. But your professor only asked for a few. Now what? Need you include all of them in your literature review? Short answer: No. *But I want the professor to know how much research I've done*, you retort. Understandable, but another key function of the literature review is adjudication—or, judging *which* sources are most relevant to include and *why*, essentially sifting through your list and transitioning from indiscriminate collection of sources to a more focused curation of the most credible and relevant sources for the constraints, genre, and purpose of your piece of writing. This takes time, experience, and deliberation—much like it would for any astute judge.

The process of adjudication serves the function of scoping your topic. So, when I say that you curate your sources according to constraints, genre, and purpose this means that you narrow down what you'll be including by thinking about how much space you have, who your audience is, what the expectations are for type of document, and what it is you are trying to accomplish. Sometimes literature reviews are one paragraph in a report, and sometimes they are 10 pages in a research paper. Sometimes the source is a journal article and sometimes it is a software application. Again, the form differs widely but the function of focusing and framing your topic remains across the board.

As an example: Imagine you just got hired for an entry level communications position at a local nonprofit environmental organization whose mission is to engage the public on issues around global warming and sea level rise. This is your dream job! You're on the communications team for a science-centered organization and can now put your English degree in technical writing to use. You're excited to funnel in your passion about

protecting the earth and its residents to a real job. You're also interested to see how your academic degree will transfer into a real-world job context.

The development team contacts the communications team with an idea. They would like to develop their own sea level rise viewer that is interactive and that would allow folks along the coastlines to see what a certain amount of flooding or sea level rise would do to their home and when. They are sick and tired of trying to connect to residents by sharing scientific data; they want to help personalize the risk in the hopes of engaging residents who are at risk. They have some preliminary design ideas, and they have a good sense of what type of coding needs to go into such a GIS-focused tool. But they want to see what the current research is on these types of tools. They of course reach out to the communications team because this team consists of astute researchers with freshly minted degrees in the humanities.

You start accumulating sources in your nifty table (Table 5.2). During your research you start to realize that on this topic there are academic sources as well as actual tools (like applications and maps). Are these "sources," you wonder? Is this part of the "literature" that needs to be reviewed? In technical contexts, the answer is *yes*. When exploring technical topics, all sources are game, even if they don't fit as neatly into the nifty table.

You consider what sources would be useful for the development team to know about. You really engaged with the Rawlins and Wilson journal article, most likely because you have a knack for theory, but would this be helpful to review for the purpose ahead of you? The constraints of the informal report genre? The audience at hand? The Stephens et al. piece you also enjoyed and was much more practical and research based. But they focused on the user experience of sea level rise viewers, which seems farther down the project road for the developers, who have barely started prototyping their vision. You realize now that a source can be quite reliable, engaging, and connected but not of immediate relevance for your project. And that's OK—that's part of savvy rhetorical adjudication that focuses on the needs of the reader more than a window into the full extent of your research.

You then decide that for this "review of literature" you'll just be listing, summarizing, and synthesizing the actual tools themselves. You'll make a note in there about how there is ample scholarship on these tools, but for the purpose of this project, and its scope, at this time you are choosing to focus on the technical sources.

Table 5.2. Populated Source Spreadsheet for Literature Reviews, Including Both Academic and Technical Sources

Author	Title	Publication	Link/DOI
Sonia H. Stephens, Denise E. DeLorme and Scott C. Hagen	Evaluating the Utility and Communicative Effectiveness of an Interactive Sea-Level Rise Viewer Through Stakeholder Engagement	<i>Journal of Business and Technical Communication</i>	https://doi.org/10.1177/105061915573963
Reliability Rating (1 to 5)	Main Argument/Findings	Connection to Your Project	
5	The authors discuss the implications of this study for visual risk communication and make recommendations for others developing similar interactive data visualization tools with audience input.	This is research on the user experience part of the tool, and not its original development.	
Author	Title	Publication	Link/DOI
Jacob D. Rawlins and Greg D. Wilson	Agency and Interactive Data Displays: Internet Graphics as Co-Created Rhetorical Spaces	<i>Technical Communication Quarterly</i>	https://doi.org/10.1080/10572252.2014.942468
Reliability Rating (1 to 5)	Main Argument/Findings	Connection to Your Project	
5	Bit complex and theoretical, but the argument seems to be the concept of agency is a useful perspective to interpret the way users interact with a variety of online graphical tools.	This could help with placing this project into an academic one that is more philosophical.	
Author	Title	Publication	Link/DOI
NOAA	Sea Level Rise Viewer	https://NOAA.gov	https://coast.noaa.gov/digital-coast/tools/slr.html
Reliability Rating (1 to 5)	Main Argument/Findings	Connection to Your Project	
5	Hmm. That sea level rise risks should be visualized? More by implication, really.	This resembles a type of tool that I think the development team wants to create.	

Table 5.3. Populated Source Spreadsheet for Literature Reviews, Including Both Academic and Technical Sources

Author	Title	Publication	Link/DOI
Climate Central	Risk Zone Map	Surging Seas?	https://ss2.climatecentral.org
Reliability Rating (1 to 5)	Main Argument/Findings	Connection to Your Project	
4?	Like NOAA, the argument is the same.	This resembles a type of tool that I think the development team wants to create—but more attainable since they are also a nonprofit, like we are.	
...

PRACTICE

You'll need practice in “summarizing” technical sources. Consider adapting the table from the previous sections to highlight information that is more relevant to technical sources (e.g., swapped out DOI and reliability for functionality and user base). I've input the NOAA source as an example (Table 5.3).

As most technical writers find out, what constitutes useful sources will constantly change according to purpose and will extend far beyond musty books and full-text periodicals. (We're two functions in and you haven't even started writing yet!)

Table 5.4. Source Spreadsheet Adapted for Technical Sources

Agency	Type	Link
NOAA	Government	https://coast.noaa.gov/digitalcoast/tools/slr.html
Origination Date	Functionality	User Base
Not sure. Last modified August 2020.	Identify address and use sea level gauge (inter-active).	Primarily coastal planners but also the public.
...

REFINES FOR THE TARGET AUDIENCE

One of the finer aspects when you get to the actual composing stage of things is making decisions about how much detail to share and what level

or language to use. In the previous case, now that you've decided about the *types* of sources you'll be including, you now need to ascertain how you'll be framing the review and how *deep* to go into them. Should you spend one sentence summarizing a source or 600 words? That depends on the genre and the amount of space you have. The most astute literature reviews also attend—not surprisingly—to the audience's needs; the language and assumptions about what they know need to be as tailored as possible. The research now needs to be refined, like that fancy wine filter thingy that elegant folks use at wine and cheese parties. I'm sure it has a name.

So, for this you'll really have to think hard about what you know about your audience so you can further improve their reading experience. If the development team are the “techy” people in the organization, what about them? Are they computer scientists? Data scientists? Web designers? Coders? Do they have college degrees? What are the types of technology they typically deal with? You need to find out as much as you can about them.

I see this issue all the time in academic papers. I'll assign a journal article for students to read and when it comes time to cite or reference that work in their paper, they assume the audience knows exactly who the authors are and what the field is. Even though I am the actual reader, assignments that ask students to “write to a more public audience” still suffer from this assumption. It'll often go like:

As Stephens et al. (2015) write, the field of UX is an important consideration of SLR viewers . . .

Not wrong, necessarily—but misguided. First of all, would the public know who Stephens et al. are? Are they scholars? And of what? Have they written about this before? Are they emerging or renowned scholars? And, also, what are UX and SLR? Are those acronyms? When summarizing a piece for a literature review, you need to absolutely calibrate your level of writing and modify your assumptions about pre-existing knowledge of the readers.

There is a big difference, then, in writing a summary of the NOAA tool for a group of data scientists than for web designers. For data scientists, you might summarize the NOAA tool as:

NOAA's Sea Level Rise Viewer is part of their Digital Coast project, an online repository of oceanographic and marine data accumulated using LiDAR technology, tide gauges, climate projections, and historical trends data sets.

“Projections, “data sets,” and “repository” would be recognizable language for data scientists, most likely, regardless of their area of expertise.

And it also highlights what they would be interested in, which are the data underlying the tool. A web designer audience, on the other hand, would most likely want to know what these tools look like and what web elements exist. It might go something more like this:

NOAA's Sea Level Rise Viewer is part of their Digital Coast project, which seeks to engage a more public audience as well as city and coastal planners by visualizing sea level rise data in an interactive map that allows for personalization and exploration.

In this case, the web designers would want to know about target audiences and users as well as the visual aspects of the tool—essentially, how it would be used. Notions of audience, “personalization,” and “exploration” would be familiar concepts to web designers.

PRACTICE

But how do you get to know your audience so well? Sometimes it is useful to create an audience profile sheet. This sheet can be filled in based on what you and your team already know about the audience or by asking them directly. An audience profile sheet might ask the following questions:

- What are the job titles of the readers?
- What are their backgrounds (majors in college, etc.)?
- What are their areas of expertise (GIS, web development, research, etc.)?
- What do they currently know about this topic?
- What do they want to or need to know about this topic?
- What are they expecting this piece of writing to look like?

Exhausted yet? Well, yes, writing effectively after conducting copious amounts of research isn't for the faint of heart. But the next function should bring this party back to life! (Even if it does begin with an archaic word . . .)

TRANSMUTES INTO TRUST

We should probably define transmute, eh? OK, Merriam-Webster (2020) defines it as such: “to change or alter in form, appearance, or nature and especially to a higher form.” (Which is probably what we wanted to do after embarrassing ourselves at the party by sharing our opinion on the new local coffee shop app, am I right?) This notion of alteration or change in

our context pertains to the fact that a useful, well-research, tailored literature review meets your readers' needs, yes, but it also imbues yourself as an author with a degree of trustworthiness. Conducting copious amounts of research, adjudicating it, and then adapting your summary of said sources to your audience, whom you actively sought to learn more about, brings about the positive net result of the reader knowing what they need to know but now also trusting your judgment.

This is why literature reviews are more than just the banal task that feels like a formal requirement in papers. Done well, literature reviews are just as persuasive as the argument or position or proposal you lay out because, rhetorically speaking, *ethos* (your credibility and character) matters. Perhaps you've had this experience where two people have presented the same argument or provided the same advice to you, in the exact same form and construction, but because it came out of one person's mouth and not the other, it spurred you to change or consider it—most likely because you trust one person over another. The source of an idea matters, and we have both conscious and unconscious ways we trust people and their ideas. If a well-written literature review can increase the degree of trust in your reader, then why not do this work? You might have a savvy argument but if you cannot show the reader that you are aware of the research on that topic that came before you, then why would someone believe you?

Let's say, for example, that you have an internship with your local city government in their office of elections. You notice that on their website they include flyers educating college students on how to register to vote. These flyers are poorly designed; you ask your director if you can take a shot at revising them knowing what you know about usability, accessibility, rhetoric, and document design. Your director agrees, but she'll need first to see an informal proposal of why this work needs to be done before she can approve such a time-consuming project and take you away from other tasks. In essence, she needs to know that she can trust that what you're doing is worthwhile.

You begin work on the proposal, which has the fairly clear purpose of persuading your director that design is important in voter documentation materials. But *how* to communicate that purpose? You get the sense that your director is content with having the information on flyers, regardless of form or design. *The information is accurate after all, so why should we spend any time on revising them, on redesigning them?* All fair questions, to be sure.

You begin to realize that the type of research your director will need to see is research on the positive impact on well-designed voter documentation

materials—ranging from brochures, to flyers, to ballots. She knows accurate voter documentation materials are important, of course, but perhaps not that much about the importance of well-designed ones. More than that, she'll need to trust that you know what you're talking about. So, this is less about overwhelming your director with evidence after evidence but more about eliciting trust by establishing shared interest. And this can happen even within the context of a low-stakes informal proposal. You begin to cull the resources from your undergrad courses in writing and design, knowing that a well-researched proposal will give your director the faith and trust required to have you move forward with this project.

PRACTICE

One strategy is to reach out to someone that you yourself trust on the given topic and have them review what you've written. A brief peer review from an expert in that field will help ensure you are depicting the field or topic well.

YOKES YOU TO OTHERS

Another odd, archaic word? Really? Yes, really. Back to the dictionary: Yoke is defined in many senses. The first is: “a wooden bar or frame by which two draft animals (such as oxen) are joined at the heads or necks for working together” (“Yoke”). Are there oxen at this party? Maybe. Maybe not. But the essence of it is there, and more evident in the last primary definition: “a clamp or similar piece that embraces two parts to hold or unite them in position.” That should be clearer. The literature “yokes” you to others by uniting your voice with theirs, even if it is in agreement or disagreement.

This is different than the first function of participation. Yoking yourself to others means the literature review lets readers know the individuals and texts and projects and ideas you think are important and should act as a lineage for your current piece of writing. In some cases, you don't have much of a choice in a key scholar or practitioner to cite. It is hard, for example, to talk about design and user experience without at least tipping your hat to Donald A. Norman, author of *The Design of Everyday Things*. And in most cases being yoked to Norman's work is in your best interest, since it connects you to a major text and instills the audience with your credibility for knowing who the key people are in the field of study at hand.

In other cases, you have more leeway in choosing the folks you'd like to unite with. There is power in the literature review because by selecting one source or another, you are telling the reader: “This is how the story

goes and who has written it so far.” There is power in these decisions. In this sense you are not only participating in a conversation and selecting the sources, you are, theoretically, in some cases, actually becoming a part of the collective of thinkers who care about this topic. You are no longer a passive spectator but rather an active participant, yoked to folks who also care. You are oxen tilling fields of knowledge.

PRACTICE

Select two sources that are closely related, either in argument or method. Review the sources they reference or cite in their own work, and ask: Are they the same? Different? Why or why not?

CONCLUSION

Before we finish, you should know that there is a popular concept created by famous rhetoric scholar Kenneth Burke called “the unending conversation.” He uses the metaphor of a parlor to help describe how argument works, and I think it is a useful way for you as a student to understand literature reviews as well:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress (Burke 110-111).

Certainly, my use of “P-A-R-T-Y” relies on Burke's inspiration. The similarity of this description to mine in the first function, *participation*, wherein you argue about the social function of local coffee shops is obvious. The main difference I wanted to make is that in Burke's construction, there is success. In ours, there is not.

Imagine, though, if I did not cite Burke here? I'm sure even the professor who assigned you this chapter was thinking at some point, "Hmmm . . . odd how Dan doesn't mention Burke's parlor at all here even though he is borrowing heavily from it . . . Especially since his Ph.D. is literally in rhetoric." And that's just it. While not in the form of a literature review, my reference and acknowledgment of Burke saved face a little. It bolsters my *ethos* in the fields of rhetoric and technical writing, and also gives you, the reader, trust that I am at least giving guidance of some value, since I have yoked myself to one of the forbearers of modern rhetoric.

It might feel as though writing is a solitary activity because so much of it is done alone. But writing is always a social activity—writers are never alone (Ede). It may seem as though your argument about the value of a government policy, or your analysis of a text is your own. But the literature review portion of a document is the main connector of your work to others'. Without acknowledging the arguments that came before you, or the research conducted prior to your own, or how you have been influenced by—even indebted to—other ideas from other writers, your argument goes nowhere. Use this as a mindset while you are finding sources. Researching for sources is not a banal task but a basic guideline for participating in something bigger.

And that, to me, is worth popping a bottle over. Cheers to literature reviews!

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TEACHER RESOURCES

OVERVIEW AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

Instruction on composing literature reviews typically happens near the beginning of a writing project. As such, this chapter can be integrated into the early phases of student writing either as a theoretical framework to introduce students into the idea of a literature review or as a heuristic to

get students started on gathering, curating, and annotating sources that are to be potentially relevant to their piece of writing—or both! There is a procedural element to this chapter that might allow for instructors to use it as a guide over the course of one or two weeks at the outset of an assignment, as students transition from finding sources to evaluating them to curating them.

Given my argument that literature reviews are an integral part of many genres, from academic papers to informal proposals, this chapter can be applied to most any genre covered in a technical writing classroom. That said, individual instructors will need to supplement this chapter with specific guidance on the particularities of the nature of literature reviews for each genre. Issues such as length, style, tone, and depth of “literature reviews,” broadly defined, are determined by genre, industry, and organization. Integrating these specific features into the larger instruction on literature reviews will be most helpful.

The tables used in this chapter also might lend themselves well to collaborative work, where groups of students are tasked with finding and synthesizing their researched sources into a centralized document.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Consider supplementing this chapter with the following questions:

1. How have you been taught to write literature reviews in the past? Was it always in the context of academic papers?
2. Where else do you see the function of literature reviews in contexts not discussed here? Do you see overviews of existing content take shape in, say, YouTube videos? If so, how?
3. In a small group, discuss how literature reviews vary by major, field, or discipline. What differences do you see? And why do you think those differences exist?
4. Composing an effective literature review requires handling a good deal of information. What are some ways you can manage your content and information in an efficient way?