

How to Write a Literature Review: An Overview for International Students

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May 2010

Agenda

- What is a literature review?
- Challenges for international students
- Finding appropriate sources of information
- Searching effectively
- Managing references
- Putting it all together
- Using in-text citations
- Finding your voice

What is a literature review?

- A place to make connections between what you are investigating and what has already been investigated in your subject area
- A place to engage in a type of conversation with other researchers in your subject area
- A place to identify previous research on the topic
- A place to show there is a gap in the literature which your study can fill
- A place from which to begin your own investigation

Making connections

The 'literature review' is the part of the thesis where there is extensive reference to related research and theory in your field; it is where connections are made between the source texts that you draw on and where you position yourself and your research among these sources.

Ridley, D. (2008). *The literature review: A step-by-step guide for students*. London: Sage Publications, p. 2.

Engaging with other researchers

It is your opportunity to engage in a written dialogue with researchers in your area while at the same time showing that you have engaged with, understood and responded to the relevant body of knowledge underpinning your research.

Ridley, p. 2.

Identifying previous research

The literature review is where you identify the theories and previous research which have influenced your choice of research topic and the methodology you are choosing to adopt.

Ridley, p. 2.

Showing a gap in the literature

You can use the literature to support your identification of a problem to research and to illustrate that there is a gap in previous research which needs to be filled.

Ridley, p. 2.

Beginning your own investigation

The literature review, therefore, serves as the driving force and jumping-off point for your own research investigation.

Ridley, p. 2.

General Challenges

“Higher education courses seldom teach how to write a literature review, and good literature reviews are difficult for many beginning writers and researchers.”

Maddux, C. D., & Liu, L. (2005). Publishing research findings: Some suggestions for junior faculty. *International Journal of Technology in Teaching and Learning*, 1(2), 55-62.

General Problems (Maddox & Liu)

- 1. Some reviews consisted only of a largely unrelated annotated list of studies.
- 2. Many of the studies listed in the reviews were not relevant to the new study.
- 3. Many theories were mentioned or described in the reviews, but often without a clear, logical connection among the theories and without clearly pointing out the relevance of each description.

(Maddox & Liu, 60).

Answering general challenges

- Finding literature on your topic is only part of the process.
- What literature you do include must be relevant to your area of investigation.
- What pieces of the literature you do include must be logically connected to each other.

Challenges for international students

- Language challenges – knowledge and proficiency in English at a high level
- Educational background challenges – how and when English was learned as an L2
- Cultural challenges – where English was learned as an L2
- Support challenges – what assistance is available for helping L2 learners improve their writing skills

Chinese Graduate Students' Experiences with Writing a Literature Review

Jun Qian and Eva Krugly-Smolka

Based on interview data, this study investigated four Chinese graduate students' experiences with writing a literature review at a medium-sized university in Canada. These students, from four subject areas, held varying perceptions of a literature review, but all saw the writing challenges that they encountered mainly as linguistic problems, especially regarding vocabulary and accuracy at the sentence level. The strategies that they used in the composing process were diverse, with each individual relying on them to varying degrees. Findings from this study suggest that Chinese graduate students need assistance in adjusting to the new academic environment and writing-genre expectations.

Reposant sur des données d'entrevues, cette étude est axée sur les expériences de quatre étudiants chinois des cycles supérieurs alors qu'ils apprenaient à rédiger une analyse documentaire dans une université de taille moyenne au Canada. Les participants, qui étudiaient dans quatre domaines différents, avaient diverses perceptions d'une analyse documentaire, mais tous interprétaient les défis rédactionnels qu'ils confrontaient comme étant surtout linguistiques, notamment lexicaux et syntaxiques. Lors de la rédaction, les étudiants ont employé une diversité de stratégies, auxquelles ils ont eu recours dans différentes mesures. Les résultats indiquent que les étudiants chinois des cycles supérieurs ont besoin d'appui dans leur adaptation à leur nouveau milieu académique et aux attentes liées à la rédaction.

Challenges (Qian & Krugley-Smolska)

- Limited vocabulary
- Sentence-level difficulties – aim for simple and clear
- Paraphrasing – when and how

Strategies (Qian & Krugley-Smolska)

- Reading and modeling – read many reviews by other researchers
- Planning – develop a writing plan before you start writing
- Using the L1 and translation – do not write in Chinese first and then simply translate into English
- Communication with the supervisor – seek advice and feedback

How to Begin?

Finding Appropriate Sources of Information

- **Know what is appropriate:**
 - Scholarly, academic, peer-reviewed material
 - Material that presents empirical data/evidence to back up claims, not just opinions
 - Material that presents an introduction, purpose, background literature, method, procedures, findings, discussion, implications, conclusion
- **Know where to begin searching:**
 - Book catalogues
 - Library databases – Education Research Complete, Education @ Scholars Portal, ERIC, Educational Administration Abstracts, Education: Sage Full-Text Collection

Use books as a beginning point

- Why books first?
- They gather a lot of information on one topic in one place.
- They can provide a good overview or good background information on a topic.
- They often offer extensive bibliographies.

Book Searching

- Our library catalogue - <http://catalogue.library.brocku.ca/>
- Other Ontario universities
- National Library of Canada
- WorldCat – <http://www.worldcat.org>

Look for journal articles second

- Journal articles discuss one perspective.
- Each article makes a unique contribution.
- Articles can supplement information found first in books.
- Articles can offer more up-to-date information.

Note on journal articles

- Don't rely on one journal article to give you all the content points you want to cover.
- It is your job to look at each journal article as one piece of information, and then to put all those pieces of information together.
- Putting the pieces together = making an argument



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Another beginning point

- <http://scholar.google.ca/>

Caveats:

- Google Scholar does not have nearly the number of publisher agreements as are available through our 400+ library databases.
- Use the [Get It @Brock](#) option to get back to full-text items from our databases (rather than going to a publisher's page and paying them for information).
- Use Google Scholar in conjunction with RACER, our interlibrary loan system at Brock University.

Citation chasing

- Searching from a known item (an article your professor gave you, the bibliography of a book on the topic)
- Find the bibliographic information for the item
- **Cited Reference Searching** - See who else may have cited it (Ebsco databases like Education Research Complete, Web of Science, Google)

http://apps.isiknowledge.com/WOS_CitedReferenceSearch.do

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Step 2 of 2: Select cited references and click "Finish Search."

Select the references for which you wish to see the citing articles, then click the "Finish Search" button.

Hint: Look for [cited reference variants](#) (sometimes different pages of the same article are cited or papers are cited incorrectly).

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Locating known journal articles

- Do a “journal title” search in the Library Catalogue.
- It will tell you which of the 400 databases indexes that journal (so you don’t have to guess which database).



(Search History)

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tesol quarterly

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- Use quotation marks for bound phrase searching (*“literature review”* instead of *literature review*).
- Use descriptors (subject headings) rather than keywords – some databases include their own thesaurus of controlled subject vocabulary (ex. ERIC Thesaurus).

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Literature Reviews

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- ☐ Use **AND** to narrow
- ☒ Use **OR** to broaden
- ☐ Explode to include all narrower terms

[Search](#)☐ **Literature Reviews**

Surveys of the materials published on a topic (Note: Prior to Mar80, "Research Reviews (Publications)" was also a valid Descriptor)

Use For

Literature Surveys

Reviews of the Literature


Broader Terms☐ [Publications](#) [+]**Related Terms**☐ [Anthologies](#)

Collections of selected writings or other materials, usually in one form, from one period, or on one subject

☐ [Bibliographies](#) [+]

Descriptive lists of books or other printed materials, which are written by one author, during one period, on one subject, produced by one printer and/or publisher, or located in one place (Note: Corresponds to Pubtype code 131 -- do not use except as the subject of a document)

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[Zorn, Ted](#)¹ tzorn@mngt.waikato.ac.nz
[Campbell, Nittaya](#)¹

Source:

[Business Communication Quarterly](#); Jun2006, Vol. 69 Issue 2, p172-183, 12p, 1 diagram

Document Type:

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Subject Terms:

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Abstract:

The article refers to research on the genre of *literature reviews* and citation and discusses a method for teaching college students to write *reviews*, which might be required in their business communication courses. Guidelines

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Search Tips

Phrase Searches

Search for complete phrases by enclosing them in quotation marks. Words enclosed in double quotes will appear together in all results exactly as typed.

"world health organization"

Wildcards

Words may be right-hand truncated using an asterisk. Use a single asterisk * to truncate from 1-5 characters. Use a double asterisk ** for open-ended truncation.

environment* polic*

inter**

You may also use a question mark (?) to replace a single character anywhere within a word.

wom?n

Boolean Operators

Use AND or OR to specify multiple words in any field, any order. Use AND NOT to exclude words. Select the operator you wish to use from the selection list. Parentheses group words together when using Boolean operators.

stocks and bonds

(indian or pacific) and
(ocean life and not
mammals)

Proximity Operators

The NEAR operator is used to retrieve records that contain the specified words or phrases within ten words of each other in the same indexed field.

international near
conference

The WITHIN operator is similar to the NEAR operator, but allows the user to specify the maximum number of words that may appear between the specified words. WITHIN 10 and NEAR are equivalent.

fractal within 3 geometry

Field limits

Field limits may be specified by selecting a field limit from the selection list in the form above. These limits appear before the word or phrase to be searched. A field limit causes the system to search only the specified field for the specified word(s). The following field limits are supported:

<u>Field limit</u>	<u>Meaning</u>
Author:	Search only author fields
Title:	Search only title fields
Subject:	Search only subject fields
Note:	Search only note fields

Learn how to read a citation

Chinese Graduate Students' Experiences with
Writing a Literature Review. Citation Only
Available By: Qian, Jun; Krugly-Smolksa, Eva.
TESL Canada Journal, Winter2008, Vol. 26
Issue 1, p68-86, 19p.

(from Education Research Complete)



TESL Canada Journal

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- An alert is an email message sent to you when new information becomes available.
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2. [Problem-Based Learning in 9th Grade Chemistry Class: 'Intermolecular Forces'](#). By: Tarhan, Leman; Ayar-



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- Use RefWorks to build your own database of information.
- RefWorks holds citations and their links to the full text.
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- RefWorks allows you to create in-text references.

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Source: [Canadian Journal of Dietetic Practice and Research](#), 2006, 67, 3, P4

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Title: Medicare; INSPIRIS to serve Humana's frail elderly population in Phoenix

Authors:

Source: [Medical Letter on the CDC & FDA](#), 2006, 74

☐ Ref ID: 147 Journal Article Reference 5 of 245 [View](#) [Edit](#)

Title: Canadian First Nations War Hero Celebrated. (Cover story)

Putting It All Together

- You have found a lot of literature
 - Now what?
- You need to organize what you have found:
 - By theme?
 - Chronologically?
- Tip: look at some examples



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Using In-Text Citations

- In-text citations draw upon the literature to support your points.
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OWL MATERIALS

From the OWL resource APA Formatting and Style Guide

This resource was written by **David Neyhart and Erin Karper. Additional material by Kristen Seas.**
 Last full revision by **Jodi Wagner and Kristen Seas.**
 Last edited by Allen Brizee on April 9th 2008 at 10:25AM



[Jump to listing of all of this resource's sections](#)

In-Text Citations: The Basics

Reference citations in text are covered on pages 207-214 of the Publication Manual. What follows are some general guidelines for referring to the works of others in your essay.

Note: APA style requires authors to use the past tense or present perfect tense when using signal phrases to describe earlier research. E.g., Jones (1998) **found** or Jones (1998) **has found**...

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In-Text Citation Capitalization, Quotes, and Italics/Underlining

Always capitalize proper nouns, including author names and initials: D. Jones.

If you refer to the title of a source within your paper, capitalize all words that are four letters long or greater within the title of a source: *Permanence and Change*. Exceptions apply to short words that are verbs, nouns, pronouns, adjectives, and adverbs: *Writing New Media*, *There Is Nothing Left to Lose*.

When capitalizing titles, capitalize both words in a hyphenated compound word: *Natural-Born Cyborgs*.

Capitalize the first word after a dash or colon: "Defining Film Rhetoric: The Case of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*."

Italicize or underline the titles of longer works such as books, edited collections, movies, television series, documentaries, or albums: *The Closing of the American Mind*; *The Wizard of Oz*; *Friends*.

Put quotation marks around the titles of shorter works such as journal articles, articles from edited collections, television series episodes, and song titles: "Multimedia Narration: Constructing Possible Worlds"; "The One Where Chandler Can't Cry."

Short Quotations

If you are directly quoting from a work, you will need to include the author, year of publication, and the page number for the reference (preceded by "p.").

Introduce the quotation with a signal phrase that includes the author's last name followed by the date of publication in parentheses.

According to Jones (1998), "Students often had difficulty using APA style, especially when it was their first time" (p. 199). Jones (1998) found "students often had difficulty using APA style" (p. 199); what implications does this have for teachers? If the author is not named in a signal phrase, place the author's last name, the year of publication, and the page number in parentheses after the quotation. She stated, "Students often had difficulty using APA style," (Jones, 1998, p. 199), but she did not offer an explanation as to why.

Long Quotations

Place direct quotations longer than 40 words in a free-standing block of typewritten lines, and omit quotation marks. Start the quotation on a new line, indented five spaces from the left margin. Type the entire quotation on the new margin, and indent the first line of any subsequent paragraph within the quotation five spaces from the new margin. Maintain double-spacing throughout. The parenthetical citation should come after closing punctuation mark.

Jones's (1998) study found the following:

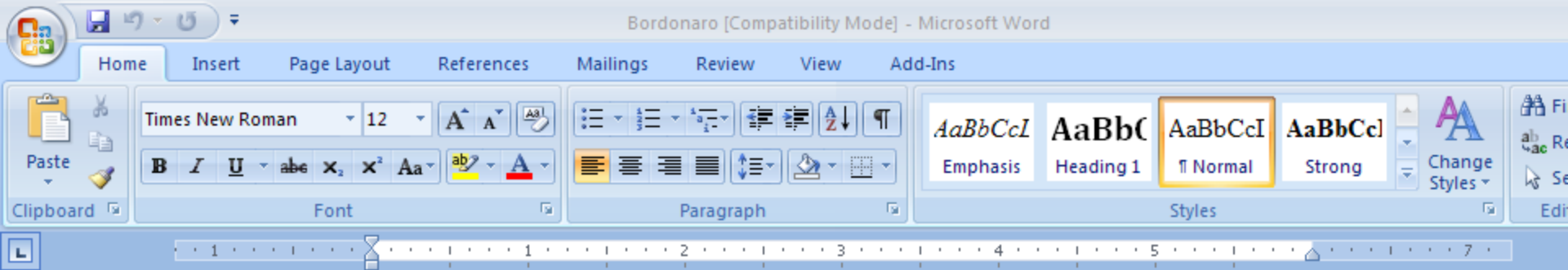
Students often had difficulty using APA style, especially when it was their first time citing sources. This difficulty could be attributed to the fact that many students failed to purchase a style manual or to ask their teacher for help. (p. 199)

Summary or Paraphrase

If you are paraphrasing an idea from another work, you only have to make reference to the author and year of publication in your in-text reference, but APA guidelines encourage you to also provide the page number (although it is not required.)

According to Jones (1998), APA style is a difficult citation format for first-time learners.

APA style is a difficult citation format for first-time learners (Jones, 1998, p. 199).



Information literacy is a library process. In an influential early article, Carol Kuhlthau (1991) built a model of information literacy that she called the "Information Search Process". She describes this process as "the user's constructive activity of finding meaning from information in order to extend his or her state of knowledge on a particular problem or topic. It incorporates a series of encounters with information within a space of time rather than a single reference incident." (Kuhlthau, p. 361). Craig Gibson (2007) picks up on this thread of information literacy as a process when he describes the current state of studies about the topic "centered on concepts and processes of accessing, evaluating, and using information" (Gibson, p. 23).

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Read “how to” manuals for ideas

- Author [Dunleavy, Patrick](#). Title **Authoring a PhD : how to plan, draft, write, and finish a doctoral thesis or dissertation / Patrick Dunleavy**. Imprint Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

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- Study comments made on your own papers by your professors.
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Sample APA Papers: Literature Review

This resource was written by **Karen S. Mooney**.
Last full revision by .
Last edited by Dana Lynn Driscoll on May 15th 2007 at 3:03PM

Summary: This resource provides a sample literature review student paper. It is marked up with psychology teacher's comments and points out rhetorical considerations.

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Educational Psychology

Vol. 27, No. 6, December 2007, pp. 807–822



Writing Approaches of Graduate Students

Ellen Lavelle* and Kathy Bushrow

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, USA

The writing approach framework provides a comprehensive perspective on college-level academic writing based on the relationship of writers' beliefs and strategies to the quality of written outcomes. However, despite increased demands for more and better writing at the graduate level, little is known about graduate-level writing processes or about the beliefs of graduate students regarding writing. The goals of this project were the preliminary development of a factor analytic model of graduate writing processes, and of an inventory to measure writing strategies. The results support seven independent factors: elaborative, low self-efficacy, no revision, intuitive, scientist, task-oriented, and sculptor, with the intuitive factor predictive of an academic writing outcome.

Presenting your own voice

When writing your literature review, there are two main ways of presenting your own voice assertively. The first is by taking control of the text and leading your reader through the content... The second is by making your own position clear in relation to the source material that you incorporate and being explicit about how you will be drawing on particular aspects of previous work for your own research.

Ridley, p. 131

Ways of making your position clear

- Use the first person singular pronoun: “*I*,” “*in my view*”
- Use explicit transitions: “*in direct contrast*,” “*in exactly the same way*”
- Use strong adjectives: “*insufficient*,” “*weak*,” “*supportive*,” “*most valuable*”
- Ask yourself: *Whose voice is strongest: mine or the authors I am citing?*

Writing is a circular process

- Nothing will ever be perfect at any given moment in time.
- There is a constant need for improvement.
- Learn as you go along.
- Recognize what a good literature review may look like and strive to reach that goal.

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Ted Zorn and Nittaya Campbell
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Such phrasing is appropriate if that is the case, but not if the source is simply someone's opinion.

Third, a problem that may occur is that the writer may assert generalizations that are not sufficiently supported by the literature cited. As a result, the reader is not convinced of the writer's conclusions.

Finally, poor organization or structure is a final writing problem that detracts from the effectiveness of literature reviews. Poor structure can make the argument or logic of the synthesis difficult for the reader to comprehend.

CHARACTERISTICS OF WELL-WRITTEN LITERATURE REVIEWS

To a large extent, the features that characterize effective writing in general also characterize effective literature reviews. Therefore, we will focus on those aspects of writing that are unique to literature reviews or are particularly problematic.

Literature reviews should include the following main components (UC-Santa Cruz, 2003):

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1. An introduction that provides an overview of the focus and objectives of the review, along with a thesis statement
2. A set of themes that categorize and make sense of the sources reviewed and develop the thesis (e.g., sources that support a particular position, those opposed, and those offering alternative views)
3. Explanation and evaluation of conclusions reached by key sources, and explanation of how they converge and diverge from the conclusions reached by other sources
4. Conclusions, reasonable speculations, and gaps that emerge after considering the sources as a whole

The introduction should articulate a clear and appropriate focus for the literature review. Like any good research project, a literature review should be guided by a specific objective or, better yet, a question to be answered. This will not only guide the search strategy for the literature review, but it should also guide the writing. Most parts of the written literature review—the introduction, the major headings, and the conclusion—can often be derived from this question. For example, imagine that the overall question driving an applied research project is, “How do employees perceive that communication about the

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Summary

- A literature review is a very important part of your thesis or dissertation.
- It grounds your study in the work of others.
- It shows how your study is connected to others.
- It displays a gap in the literature which you are attempting to fill.
- It sets the tone for the rest of your work.

Further Questions to Consider

- Is it ever appropriate to use non-scholarly material?
- Is it appropriate to include bachelors and masters theses or just doctoral dissertations?
- Do you need to include quotations in your literature review?
- Should you include statistics, data, government data, laws and regulations?
- What should you do if you are researching in an emergent area that does not have much literature?
- Do you need to balance books, journal articles, and theses?
- How far back in the literature do you need to go?
- When is enough enough?
- What is acceptable to your advisor?

Final Tips

- Keep a research journal – record what you have done, where you have looked, what searches you used, what you found.
- Searching keywords in titles can give you an overview of the literature, but searching controlled vocabulary in the databases will take you to the most focused results.
- Create a list of relevant keywords and subject terms to use.
- Always track the literature up until the completion of your first draft, but do a final search immediately prior to completing/defending your thesis.
- Have your research statement (questions) and nature of research (methodology) prior to diving straight into the literature.

For More Information

- Ridley, D. (2008). *The literature review: A step-by-step guide for students*. London: Sage Publications.
- Cooper, H.M. (1989). *Integrating research: A guide for literature reviews*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.
- Bell, J. (1993). *Doing your research project: a guide for first-time researchers in education and social science*. Buckingham, PA: Open University Press.
- Walliman, N.S. R. (2005). *Your research project: A step-by-step guide for the first-time researcher*. London: Sage Publications.

Where to get help

- Your faculty advisor
- Other professors in the department
- Your liaison librarian
- Your classmates
- From people who have gone through it before

Some final thoughts

- Don't let yourself become overwhelmed!
- It doesn't all have to be done at once.
- Focus on one part at a time.
- Divide your work into manageable chunks.
- Remember that many other people have already gone through this (and survived to tell the tale).
- It can be done.

Let's face it. Writing is hell.
(William Styron)

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