**Activity: Abstract Analysis**

At the beginning of Chapter Two, we proposed the idea that academic writers are in conversation with one another. You might want to think of the literature review writer as facilitating those conversations and putting them into writing for the purpose of helping his audience contribute to the conversation or make use of existing knowledge.

To make this clearer, let’s examine a particular example: Matthew Cohen’s “A Systematic Review of Urban Sustainability Assessment Literature,”[[1]](#footnote--1) which was published in the journal *Sustainability* in November 2017. (If you’d like to examine the whole article, you can find it at the following site:<http://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/9/11/2048>.)

The first thing to note about this article is that Cohen signals the genre to the reader in his title: “A Systematic Review” indicates that this is a literature review, not a research article. Second, the biographical information provided about Cohen states that he is an Assistant Professor of Sustainability Science at Furman University in South Carolina. This tells us that Cohen’s expertise is aligned with the journal’s scholarly scope, and, thus, he is a reliable source of information. He has ethos. Third, *Sustainability* announces that it is a peer-reviewed journal on its home page, adding a further layer of credibility to Cohen’s literature review: it has gone through the process of being reviewed by other experts before it was published.

Let’s now look at the abstract.[[2]](#footnote-0) We’ve added letters to the abstract to help facilitate our discussion of it.

As the world rapidly urbanizes, there is much focus on achieving sustainability outcomes within cities. Accomplishing this goal requires not only envisioning sustainable cities and implementing strategies, but it also demands assessing progress towards sustainable urban development. [A.] Despite a growing literature on sustainability assessment, there is room to further understand the application of sustainability assessment in urban contexts. [B] This paper presents a systematic review of urban sustainability assessment literature to (1) identify the most common methods used for urban sustainability assessment, (2) identify the most common framings for urban sustainability assessment, and (3) identify the most common categories for organizing indicators that measure urban sustainability. [C] This research finds that urban sustainability assessment in general lacks a unifying framing and that it could be better aligned with common sustainability principles. [D] The paper provides recommendations for future urban sustainability assessment research, including the employment of mixed-methods research among other strategies. [E] In closing, this research offers a generic framework around which to structure urban sustainability assessment and within which to assign indicators for measuring progress towards urban development.

In this abstract, Cohen makes a number of rhetorical moves that we’d like you to notice because they will give you a greater sense of the literature review as a genre.

A. In this statement, Cohen indicates that while there has been a lot of recent research (“growing literature”) on the topic of assessing sustainability in urban environments, more research is still needed.

B. The author explains what he’s going to do—review the research to date on this topic for the purpose of drawing out some common issues that appear in the articles.

C. He presents his evaluation of the research and demonstrates what is still missing from it.

D. The author announces that he will make recommendations based on his evaluation.

E. And finally, Cohen indicates that further progress can be made in this area of research based on his recommendations. In other words, he closes by telling his readers why his review of the literature matters.

By reading the abstract and thinking about the moves that the author makes within it, you’ve probably gotten some sense of the kind of work he did in order to write this review. Cohen did not himself assess the sustainability of any particular urban environment; instead he spent a lot of time reading and evaluating the research articles that others have published on the subject of assessing sustainability. In fact, in the body of his paper, Cohen indicates that he reviewed 69 different sources! Just imagining the amount of time and effort it would take to find, read, and evaluate 69 different articles on the same topic should help you to grasp the purpose and the audiencefor the literature review.

1. Matthew Cohen, “A Systematic Review of Urban Sustainability Assessment Literature.” *Sustainability*, vol. 9, is. 11, November 2017, 1-16. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. An abstract is a brief summary of the main points of a research article. In peer-reviewed journals, an abstract often precedes each article, giving readers a preview of what’s to come. When you are conducting library research, reading abstracts can save you some time by helping you decide whether the article is relevant to your writing project before you’ve invested too much reading time. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)