

Writing your Literature Review

(A General Guide for Postgraduate Research Students)

There is no one single correct method to writing a literature review. Therefore, this resource is a guide only. Check with your supervisor/lecturer/school to ascertain whether there are any specific requirements for your literature review before proceeding.

What is a Literature Review?

A literature review is an examination/review of the research that has been conducted in a particular field/area/topic of study. The selection of available documents (both published and unpublished) include books, theses, journal articles (print and online) conference papers, and web sources which contain information, ideas, data and evidence.

In writing the literature review, your purpose is to convey to your reader what knowledge and ideas has been established on a topic, and what their strengths and weaknesses are. As a scientific piece of writing, the literature review must be defined by a guiding concept through your research objective, the problem or issue you are discussing, or your argumentative theory. It is not just a descriptive list of the material available, or a set of summaries.

Besides enlarging your knowledge about the topic, writing a literature review allows you to gain and demonstrate skills in two areas:

a) **Literature search or Information seeking**

- the ability to identify, locate, and evaluate relevant literature such as books, theses, journal articles and web based sources efficiently, using manual or computerized methods.

b) **Critical Analysis**

- the ability to think critically, analyze and evaluate valid studies, data, evidence and other sources of information so as to deconstruct the literature that makes a significant contribution to the understanding of the topic in an objective, logical thread of thought.

A literature review must account for the following:

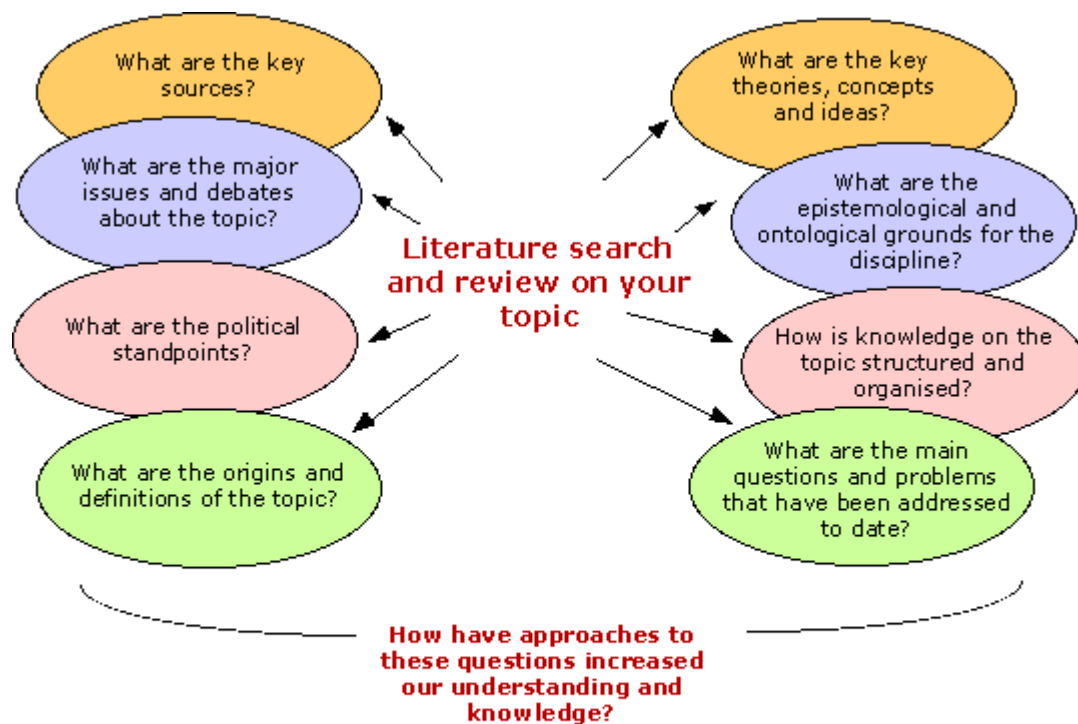
- a. be organized around and relate directly to the thesis or research question
- b. synthesize or critical analyze into a summary what is and not known
- c. identify areas of controversy in the literature
- d. formulate questions that need further research

What is the Purpose of a Literature Review?

- To demonstrate your scholarly ability to identify relevant information and to outline existing knowledge, theoretical frameworks and methodology or research methods.
- To identify the 'gap' in the research area that your study is attempting to address, positioning your work in the context of previous research and creating a 'research space' for your work.
- To evaluate and synthesize the information in line with the concepts that you have set yourself for the research.
- To produce a rationale or justification for your study.

Initially, you may read quite broadly on the topic to enrich your understanding of the field. This is useful for refining your topic and establishing the perspective that your research will take. For example, reading broadly may help you work out where there are gaps in the research, which may provide you with a niche for your research. It may also enable you to establish how your research extends or enhances the studies already done. However, remember that the literature review needs to relate to and explain your research question. Although there may seem to be hundreds of sources of information that appear pertinent, once you have your question you will be able to refine and narrow down the scope of your reading.

CORE ASPECTS FOR A GOOD LITERATURE REVIEW:



Some of the questions the review of the literature can answer

Source: Hart, C. (1988) Doing a literature review, Releasing the social science research imagination, Thousand Oaks, Sage, p. 14.

Steps in Writing your literature review:

1. Identify your research question. (Topic)

This helps you direct and structure your reading.

2. Identify and locate appropriate information for your research

Consider searching library **catalogues** (I-Link OPAC), **Databases**, DVD's, CD Roms, multimedia media releases, research publications etc. for a list of books, journal articles, theses, and other sources of information pertinent to your research question. The research for a literature review should be comprehensive. This means that it should cover all major studies relevant to the topic of the review.

It is unlikely that all sources on one topic will be found in one university library. Therefore, it may require the student to look beyond his or her own university to sources housed elsewhere. Students must therefore make use of the Inter-library loans section of their respective library should the items not be available in their respective library.

Throughout the entire research process, students should keep extremely detailed notes of each study he or she examines. This includes noting the type of study that was carried out, what or who the study subjects are, the method of the study, the study's means of data analysis, the study's findings, and the researcher's suggestions for further areas of study in the topic. It is imperative that a student take thorough notes; otherwise, the student will likely forget the details of the study necessary for inclusion in the literature review, and bibliography.

If you are a postgraduate and are unsure about how to use the library's print, electronic or internet resources effectively, a consultation with your respective Subject Librarian will help you develop and refine your research skills in the area of print, electronic and/or internet resources.

3. Read, identify, organize and critically evaluate the information

- Distinguish and establish what has been done from what needs to be done
- Discover important variables relevant to the topic
- Critically evaluate points, ideas
- Synthesize and gain a new perspective
- Identifying relationships between ideas and practice
- Establishing the context of the topic or problem
- Rationalize the significance of the problem
- Enhance and acquire the subject vocabulary
- Understand the structure of the subject
- Relate ideas and theory to applications
- Identify methodologies and techniques that have been used
- Place the research in a historical context to show familiarity with new developments

4. Make your 'voice' clear

Your 'voice', that is, your perspective, position or standpoint, should be clearly identifiable in the literature review, as in the thesis as a whole. However, in the literature review, because you are writing about other people's work it is easy for your own 'voice' to be lost. The literature review then reads like a mixture of different tones and arguments.

It is important that, firstly, your theoretical position is clearly and strongly stated and that your critical evaluations are an integral part of this. Secondly, it is important that your language clearly indicates and identifies your own or other writers' views to the question or issue.

References

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