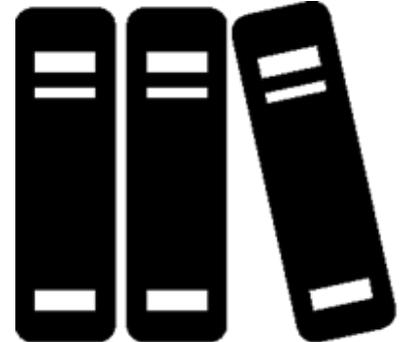


A guide to writing a literature review

What is a literature review?

- An evaluative and critical account of the published/accomplished research into a specific area of study.
- A good literature review effectively summarises, evaluates, analyses and synthesises ideas of others to support your own argument and ideas.
- It should justify the need for your research by highlighting a gap in the existing research
- You should put forward a clear relationship to existing research, research that has not been done and your own research.
- A literature review should reveal the inconsistencies and differences in the existing research.
- It should identify areas for further research or study
- It should aim to gather a new perspective on a particular topic and to offer a context to the research problem/solution



What a literature review is not

- It is not overly descriptive of the actual research that has been undertaken- a common mistake that students make is by producing a literature review that reads like a list of descriptions of other work.
- It is not a trail of thought or reflective piece; it is clear, concise and very well structured. A literature review is an ordered piece of writing and can take many drafts in order for it to reach the final copy.
- It is not solely critical; it should look at both the strengths and weaknesses of previous research (thinking about the themes and sources the work has in common)
- It is not just an argument that justifies why your research is important- while it is necessary to say why your research is necessary you must also outline the purpose of your research and what you hope to achieve by doing it.

The approaches needed for different disciplines

It is important to be aware that different subjects/disciplines require a slightly different approach to writing a literature review. Your supervisor or tutor may have a certain method or preference to developing a literature review so you should check before you begin your writing up.

Science and engineering

This discipline has very rigid conventions for structuring a literature review. A typical literature review will have an introduction and context (background) followed by a methodology. The methodology is followed by the results and a discussion and a short conclusion which draws your research together. This is often referred to as an explicit literature review.

Social science

Often a literature review within the social sciences follow a similar pattern to those within science and engineering- although some social sciences, for example; anthropology, may have less rigid conventions.

Political science

A literature review in political science may also follow a similar structure but may also include a section which outline key terminology and a section that establishes basic premises or certain political models. For example: a political science literature review may need to outline the law relating to libel and slander if it plans to investigate press freedom.

Literary and historical

Literature reviews in these disciplines do not have a unified structure, in recent literary research an 'explicit' chapter may not be necessary as often research in these subjects tend to focus on new theoretical approaches to material which has already been studied before. For example; a piece of research that looks at the work of Shakespeare's comedies in the modern context may not require a strict methodology/hypothesis.

How to approach your literature review

It has been acknowledged that there are five stages of a literature review (Cooper, 1984):

1. Find models
2. Problem formulation
3. Literature search
4. Evaluation of findings
5. Analysis and interpretation of the literature

Finding models

To help you write your literature review it may help to look at examples of literature reviews in your subject area to give you an idea of the themes or structures you may want to develop or employ within your own work. To find examples of literature review models you could do a journal search using 'literature review' and a couple of key words to retrieve relevant results.

Problem formulation

To help develop your problem and following review you should try to write a working statement- this should include your approach to the study and the study topic itself, rather than an opinion of why the research is important. The problem formulation stage will include coming up with research questions that your study will aim to answer- these questions will guide the decisions that you make throughout your research project.

Literature search

The literature search will help you identify key themes and issues within your area of study. Productive and methodical searching will help you gather relevant resources and cut down on the amount of time you have to spend filtering through unrelated work. A literature search should help you:

- Identify key authors/researchers in your subject area
- Gather resources for key pieces of research
- Always remember to write down or collect your references as you go to make writing your bibliography easier

Evaluation of findings

Reading research articles is a specific skill and different type of reading than reading for fun. You must develop a deep understanding of the literature in order to develop a comprehensive literature review- this understanding comes from reading, re-reading, and assembling ideas.

- Read the easier articles first- difficult or hard to read articles will be harder to read and will take you longer, these might be best read last when you have some familiarity of the subject area.
- Scan read the article- look for key areas. If it is not relevant then move on to the next- this cuts down on wasted time spent.
- Make notes to jog your memory- include names and dates and project titles of other key authors.

Analysis and interpretation of the literature

After you have an idea of the main ideas in each article- identify the methods that the researchers have used and the theories that have been tested. When you are comparing work- identify the approaches of the researcher, the differences opinions on the research problem and the contexts in which these works were created.

You must:

- Allow enough time for reading
- Read then re-read as an in depth knowledge will produce better writing
- Plan the way in which you will address each piece of work- be consistent in your approach

Writing the literature review

Number of articles reviewed

Published review articles may contain more than a hundred studies- you may want to consult your supervisor about how far you should go back in time and how many articles you should include.

Organisation

This could be personal choices, research led or supervisory led but the way you organise your work should first and foremost benefit you. You could contact your supervisor for more support on how to address your research project.

You may want to organise your work by taking the following steps:

1. Introduce your research question, what is it? Why is it worth investigating?
2. Relate your question to the existing research and the studies that you have highlighted as key texts.
3. Briefly outline what your literature review will do; if it is a complex area of study outline why it is complex, explain that you will present previous research and which bits of it that you want to support or reject.
4. Explain why the methodologies in the previous research are important/different or the same as yours.
5. Describe studies in detail.
6. Compare and evaluate studies.
7. Discuss the implications of the studies and how you intend to build on them.

Conclusions

Within your conclusion you would discuss or round up what you have written about previously by pulling out some key areas for further investigation or themes that you will build on during the rest of the work. After reading a literature review your reader should be convinced that your proposed research project will add to the knowledge of your subject and make a valuable contribution to the field of research.

Recommendations

You may also want to offer some recommendations for further study based on the things that you may have read within the existing literature. Usually two or three recommendations are enough to include- try not to include too many as you may want to discuss them at a later date or in other or related work.

References

Developed from original works by:

Sampson, James P. Jr., 2012. *A Guide to Quantitative and Qualitative Dissertation Research*.
[Online] Available at: http://diginole.lib.fsu.edu/edpsy_faculty_publications/1/. [Accessed
14/02/2014]