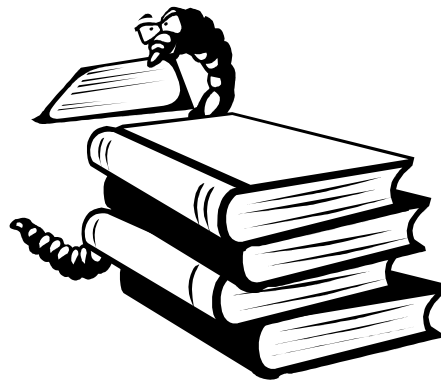


How to Review the Literature



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How to Review the Literature

The following workshop has been developed for students undertaking short research projects such as Honours, Final Year Projects and Masters by Coursework Dissertations. It will aim to:

- Discuss how you feel about undertaking a literature review
- Examine the purposes of writing a literature review
- Identify the elements of a good literature review
- Emphasise the need for critical thinking when evaluating a body of material
- Examine strategies for writing a good literature review

Review of the relevant literature

Punch (2009) contends that in a thesis the literature review should focus on literature that is most relevant to the study at hand, while paying less attention to literature that is only marginally relevant. With this in mind, he goes on to say that the 'review of the literature' actually refers to the 'review of the relevant literature'.

A literature review synthesises the relevant research literature to demonstrate that you are a competent researcher and that your thesis is valuable. A review of the literature:

- May be part of the general Introduction chapter, a separate chapter or part of each chapter
- Must have breadth (ie sufficiently comprehensive)
- Must cover "landmark" studies
- Must highlight gaps in the knowledge including discussion of the limitations of conclusions that have been made
- Must highlight areas of controversy and formulate questions that need further research
- May highlight deficiencies in current methods
- Should be concise, formal and unambiguous

Your literature review should not just be a summary of prior studies (he said, she said). It should:

*Show...that you have **integrated** the material you read and that you have **evaluated** the quality of information. After finishing the literature review (readers) should understand the research questions, procedures, and findings that characterise the field. They should also know the weaknesses of past studies and what has to be done to move the field forward. If you have organised the review skilfully you will have led the reader to the conclusion that the absolutely best next study to be done in the area is the one you are proposing (Cone and Foster 1996, p. 104).*

How do you feel about literature review work?

Many research students find that literature review work is difficult, unmanageable and overwhelming. Kamler and Thomson (2006, p. 5) have found that in the work of many research students:

... the literature is not used to locate their studies, nor to advance an argument about the state of the field in order to make the case for their own work. This is characteristic of diffident scholars who lack authority and who are literally overwhelmed by the work of others.

One way of expressing how you feel about literature review work involves using a metaphor to describe your feelings. Metaphors structure the way we think and the way we act in a fundamental way. Therefore, it is important to be aware of how you view a literature review because it can impact the way you approach it.

Literature review exercise

When you think about doing a literature review, what is it like for you? What image or metaphor comes to mind?

Write your metaphor on one of the small cards provided.

A literature review is

These cards will be collected and discussed anonymously with the whole group.

***Literature review work as a dinner party:**

- You invite to your table the scholars with whom you wish to engage in dialogue.
- The emphasis is on the company and the conversation.
- The 'dinner party' is limited in size and you choose who going, that is, who you wish to engage in dialogue with.
- As host to this 'party', you make space for the guests to talk about their work, but in *relation* to your own work. In other words, your own project is never disconnected from the conversation.
- In a literature review you are not just a witness to or a reporter of the conversation (that is, he said/she said). You are a participant. You actually 'take a seat at the scholarly table'. While you may not always catch all the complexity of the discussions you should be present, not absent. You can reflect on these conversations later and mull them over.
- Having made the connection between your work and the work of others, there is a starting point for other 'dinners'/conversations, as well as the option of not inviting some guests back and including others.
- Therefore, you draw on the literature you value most. Think about who you would like to engage in conversation with. Explain why you invited them – what do they bring to the table.

* Adapted from:

Kamler, B. & Thomson, P. 2006, 'Doctoral writing: Pedagogies for work with literatures', *Paper presented at the AERA annual meeting, April 2006, San Fransisco*, pp. 5-7.

The purposes of writing a literature review

While the form of the literature review may vary with different types of studies, the basic purposes remain constant. In general, the literature review should:

- Provide a context for the research
- Justify the research
- Ensure the research has not been done before
- Show where the research fits into the existing body of knowledge
- Provide a context for the research
- Enable the researcher to learn from previous theory on the subject
- Illustrate how the subject has been studied previously
- Critique previous research
- Identify gaps or controversies in previous research
- Show that the work is adding to the understanding and knowledge of the field
- Help refine, focus or even change the topic

From the outset, you should be aware that searching and reviewing the literature is an ongoing task. You will be extending your search and engaging with the literature throughout your research project. The techniques of searching for, analysing and critiquing relevant literature are used in many stages of your thesis project. The literature review may be presented as a discrete or stand alone segment of your thesis, but it is not. In many ways, it permeates the thesis, giving your argument strength and authority.

Your literature review is best considered as an on-going process that you should be committed to throughout the course of your research.

What makes a good literature review?

A good literature review takes significant time to develop and requires you to pass through a number of stages:

- Survey the literature
- Develop an understanding of the issues
- Subject this understanding to **critical thinking** processes
- Develop a series of reasoned arguments that lead to your hypotheses or research question



Discussion question: What does it mean to be critical in a literature review, and why is it important? What questions might you ask about the literature?

Stage 1: Literature ‘survey’: Finding a research topic

(little critical analysis at this stage)

- Survey the research area historically and thematically
- Identify the key issues and major work done previously in your area
- Understand the methodology/ies of the discipline
- Evaluate previous research
- Discover research opportunities
- Define one or more potential topics
- Generate ideas, hunches, and hypotheses
- The most recently published review article on the research area is a good place to start
- The proceedings of a recent conference will provide a good initial overview
- Identify key authors

Stage 2: Developing a proposal

(critical reading/critical thinking skills are important)

- Defining a research question
- Establishing the justification/rationale for your project
- Demonstrate how your project fits into established research
- Critically review previous research and develop your own criteria for accepting or rejecting arguments
- Demonstrate how your research will make a contribution to knowledge in the field
- Recently completed theses will include a discussion of future directions for this research (<http://adt.caul.edu.au>)

Stage 3: Doing the research

- Refine ideas
- Identify, evaluate and compare methodologies and designs
- Compare results
- Interpret results
- Keep abreast of developments in the field
- Evaluate your ideas against different perspectives
- Detect research that may contradict your hypotheses

Stage 4: In your thesis

Synthesise the relevant research literature to demonstrate that you are a competent researcher and that your thesis is valuable. Review the literature critically.



Literature review exercise: You have been given 3 excerpts from literature reviews that vary in quality. Use the quote below as a means by which to evaluate these excerpts.

*A modern review is judged solely on the quality of its ideas and opinions. The purpose of a review is not to present a catalogue of names, dates and facts, but **to present reasoned arguments about the field under review based on as many names, dates and facts as are necessary to support those arguments**" (Lindsay 1995, p. 69).*

Structuring your literature review

In writing a review of the literature, you are obliged to situate your research question or hypothesis in the context of previous work. You must do this in such a way as to explain and justify the decisions you are making. What is required to accomplish this is a step-by-step explanation of your decisions, punctuated by references to studies that support your on going argument.

Step one:

The review of literature is not the place to display everything you have read on the subject to date. You must be selective and only include studies that are critically relevant to your research. However, in the first instance it is helpful to set forth the broad pattern of knowledge as it exists in the area in order to appeal for the reader's acceptance of the logic you are about to present. So, pose here your research question, then the specific hypothesis through which the question will be answered.

Step two:

Organise the literature review into sections that present themes or identify trends, including relevant theory. You are not trying to list all the material published, but to synthesise and evaluate it according to the guiding concept of your thesis or research question. Here is where you can really show the reader that you have evaluated the quality of the information.

Step three:

Identify the line of argumentation you want to pursue. Now you need to marshal evidence for your thesis from the material that you have selected and grouped thematically. Without referring to the specific details in the articles, summarise in one or two paragraphs the combined findings of each cluster of studies. As you present your argument, identify gaps in the research that your study will fill. Also show how your study will extend the knowledge that has already been established.

Step four:

Write a conclusion that summarises and reiterates your argument.

Don't forget to check out the online Honours Hub at:

http://www.studentservices.uwa.edu.au/ss/learning/online_services/honours_hub

where you will find:

- information on upcoming Honours skills workshops
- podcasts and handouts from previous workshops
- a message board where you can post questions/comments
- links to a variety of Honours-related resources
- a personal account of Honours from a past student

Individual appointments are also available for you to:

- receive feedback on your written work
- discuss time management issues
- get additional support with your Honours studies

For more info on appointments contact Dr Lucy Reilly at:

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