How to do a Literature Review

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1. Definition
2. Organising a lit review
3. Writing a lit review

1. Definition

1.1 Functions

* What was done previously on the topic
* Where are the gaps in the literature (as you see them); what are they -- eg. Gaps A, B, C
* How does your study fill the gaps
* Sets boundaries for your study - focus only eg. on Gap C

1.2 Critical evaluation

The ordinary language meaning of the word *critical*: someone who finds fault with every thing; usually opinions, tastes -- eg. your hair is too long/short/straight/curly/blonde/dark.... etc. Ordinary meaning is subjective.

Scientific meaning of *critical* is more objective, as logical and philosophical tools are used in the analysis when regarding seomthing critically. Eg. one would analyse the assumptions on which statements are made. Evidence could be logical, experimental, statistical, etc. Hair lenght/color etc. cannot really be analysed criticlaly in scientific terms; but the subjective opinions about hair lenght/color can - eg. to point out that such opinions are based on social/cultural/personal preferances, which are idiosyncratic and relative.

1.3 Scope and length

The final deliverable (i.e. the thesis) captures only a fraction of what was done.
The scope in the written thesis should target only the identified Gap.
-- i.e. read wider than the topic, but not too widely
* Current state of the theory - what is the dominant theory/paradigm?
* Refer to the main quoted authors
* Include past contributions
    For Honours and Masters: approximately cover the past 10 years
        But really big names are important - its impossible to write about the general theory of gravity without mentioned Einstein's work, even if it is more than a hundred years old
    For PhD: entire history of the field
* Use language and ideas economically

The focus is on the idea that fills the Gap. Ideas not directly related are only to be used in support. If they do not support the main idea, kill them....
* You must be able to synthesise all the writing consulted in a concise presentation - summarise them coherently.

In short, do a :
* Summary of existing knowledge
* Critical evaluation

Include:
* What has been said / done before?
* What is relevance of that for your study

* How does your study differ from hat has been said / done before?
* On which points do you agree / on which points do you disagree?
* Why are other proposeals weak compared to yours? i.e. why do you think you are right?

Sources
* Databases
* Abstracts of publications
* Indices - books, journals
* Consult with library research consultant

Order in which to consult sources
* Articles in international, refereed journals (eg. IEEE. ACM, AIS)
* Books / chapters in edited books
* Articles in national, refereed journals
* Conference papers and research reports
* PhD dissertations and Masters theses
* Websites and articles in non-refereed journals - this is where Wikipedia ranks!!!

2. Organising your literature review

Components:
1 Background information
2 Theory
3 Review of literature on instruments
4 Summary

2.1 Background information
* Introduce the topic
* Describe the scope and organisation
* Review past and present literature
* Clarify the purpose of the study

2.2 Theory
* History: No theory is grabbed from thin air. There is always a history, even if only indirect
* Integrate all literature - don't just summarise each author in silos -- how do all the various ideas hang together?
* Don't quote irrelevant ideas - if an idea is not directly related, kill it

2.3 Review of literature on instruments
* Which instruments (questionnaires/interviews) are chosen. Why?
* Evidence to support the choice for the focus of the study
* How reliable and valid are stimates
* Describe samples

Summarise

2.4 Summary
What to address in the summary
* How has the topic been studied?
* What were the findings?
* Which issues have bene highlighted?
* How were key terms / concepts been used?

Summarising the work of others
* Info about participants used - why were they included?
* Sample size
* Location of study
* Type of study - was it interview, survey, experiment, etc
* Nature of the task - details of the tests used
* Findings - numerical / descriptive
* How do findings relate to the thesis topic

Also synthesize:
* don't just list the work of others - how do their views relate to one another, and to yours
* draw together all the ideas from the literature
* point out the premises/assumptions, logical argument
* what are highlighted issues
* similarities and differences between literature and your study
* which are consensus areas

Tips:
* Compare and contrast the views
* Point out similar conclusions
* Criticise the methodologies
* Point out areas where uthors disagree
* Highlight tudies that stand out
* Show the gaps in existing literature
* Show how your study relates to previous work of others (or your own, if you have published before)
* How do studies relate to your own
* Summarise the literature

Critique
* Point out strength and weaknesses in views other than your own.
* You may use the critiue of other writers - acknowledge
* Is the sample size adequate
* What is the research design -- is it appropriate for the purpose of the research
* Which measures are used
* What are the biases
* What are the variables -- constraining / confounding

Critical analysis checklist
* What is the main idea of a writing
* What are the points in the development of the idea
-- how does the argument proceed
* What evidence is provided; what is the quality of the evidence
* Do you agree with the writer's conclusion(s)
* The text that you are criticizing: was it a response to the text of another author
* What is the underlying theory / paradigm / hypothesis / assumption
* Is the text about further developing another model
* Or does it offer a new model
* Show the strengths / weaknesses / limitations of the model - compare with your own

research

Methodological critique
* Was the sample size adequate
* What is the nature of the randomised trials
* How reliable is the control group
* Is the method valid
* Make sure to cover all issues / ideas / boundaries / relevant areas / dimensions

3. Writing a literature review

* Organise literature around your themes/ topics
* Give a heading to each topic category; and sub-headings to sub-categories
* Don't yet worry about the overall picture - how topics relate to one another

Presentation
* Text
* Tables
* Charts
* Diagrams

Practical tips
* Write notes
* Give notes/files/cards sensible names - to find them later on
* From the very start, add sources to the bibliography - you can always later delete those you did not use
* Make sure to distinguish between your notes about a source (eg an article) and the actual words of authors. Even while note taking, indicate page numbers and dates.
* If you use a computer, make daily backups