HOW TO WRITE A LITERATURE REVIEW IN A PROPOSAL/THESIS: A CONVERSATION WITH A PURPOSE

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HOW TO WRITE A LITERATURE REVIEW IN A PROPOSAL/THESIS: A CONVERSATION WITH A PURPOSE

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I. Introduction

This open access discussion is based on a brief conversation I had with a few of my supervisees after reading the first drafts of their proposals (levels not necessary to mention her). It is made for a general student readership and those struggling with this issue. I have avoided referring to standard meanings and definition of terms and concepts. It was an off the classroom piece which I felt would help struggling students worldwide. As a student and teacher, I found little help online about this issue myself; reason why I decided to upload it as raw as it is. Based on expertise, I also recognize that ideas and approaches may differ but I trust that what I present here would in the majority be more helpful than misleading. I wish you good luck in advance with the reading and with your research. You may want to contact me on the email above.

2. What is a literature review?

In any research writeup/proposal, you would be required to write a literature review. A literature review is a succinct survey of the literature related to the topic you are researching. By related I mean that not all the stuff on the internet and the library which has the key words on your topic can feature on the literature review section or chapter of your work. You can only determine that the literature is related after a quick survey or flip-through it and reading its abstract/summary/table of contents and or the introduction. For books, particular chapters may be useful to your research. In that case, you review the book with particular reference to that chapter. For articles it is easier to read the topic and the abstract and determine whether it has any relation to your topic. This notwithstanding, it is the student's or researcher's responsibility to read the entire work to be reviewed in order to get a holistic picture of the study and be able to represent him/her/them rationally in the literature review.

3. How do I tell that the said literature is useful and can be reviewed?

There are many ways to know the relevant literature to your topic.

1. It has addressed the same content/concepts you are dealing with but the objectives may have been different

2. It has addressed the same content/concepts, the objectives may have been the same but the instruments may have been different

3. It may have addressed the same content/concepts but the results are unclear, doubtful, and so there is need for the research to be replicated.

4. It may have addressed the same content/concepts but the research area (area of study or geographical scope) may have been different.

5. It discusses the theories you plan to use in your work and so should be a significant part of your theoretical review section (of the literature review)

6. It presents the geographical area and historical background of your topic/area of study

7. It addresses your topic but it is controversial in its arguments and findings and so needs to be confirmed/re-examined etc

Note: the researcher must be careful and avoid walking in the same lines as other researchers. This may be leading you to the temptation of plagiarism and you may be accused of it if your work tends to be very similar (topic/objectives, structure) to some already undertaken work).

Some students do these and carefully do not refer/cite the work they are copying. This is criminal and, in this age, you wouldn't hide it for too long. You would be caught.

4. What should constitute your literature review?

In the proposal, you may simply be required to show proof of awareness of the existing knowledge of your field; the major authors and researchers and their ideas/findings. However, this knowledge is expected to cover all aspects of the literature review that you will deal with in the main project. These include theoretical authors; conceptual authors as well as empirical researchers. At the stage of the proposal, the review section is not always definite as you will come across even a bigger literature picture as you start the research. Even on the day of the presentation of the proposal, some of the panel members/audience may suggest some authors that you never knew existed.

5. How do I organize my literature review?

In the main project, you may be required to organize your literature review section/chapter in a particular way depending on the internal regulations. However, a commonly adopted structure is to present the theoretical review, the conceptual review and the empirical review. While the theoretical and

conceptual reviews deal with authors who have discussed the theories and elaborated the main concepts of your study respectively, the empirical review requires you to discuss authors who have actually undertaken first hand research on particular aspects of your study. In this case I am thinking of those who have done Bachelors/Honours, Masters and PhD research thesis on the topic and those who have written journal articles. This may also include published books born out of field work. Sometimes because of the limits on words in a proposal, breaking the literature review into sections may be left for the main thesis. However, in the proposal, you can differentiate each section with a new paragraph starting with the key words such as theoretically….; As far as the empirical literature is concerned…

6. How do I present a literature Review?

Generally, in my experience with reading students' work, I have seen that they try to tell you something good or nice that the author has said in his work. They refer therefore to a particular page in the work. This is not bad or out of place but doesn't constitute the essential purpose of a literature review for a proposal or thesis. By asking you to present a literature review, they are asking you to show mastery of the authors in your field, their research and major findings and how these relate to your own study. In this case a global picture/idea/summary of the work is necessary. Essentially the following issues may be needed and may help you to save a lot of word space that you may have wasted in telling stories or paraphrasing issues in the work.

1. Who is the author/are the authors?
2. What is the scope/focus of the work? This can be sorted quickly by referring to the topic, the objectives or research questions
3. What are the major findings/? For articles, you can find these in the abstract (even 2 above can be found in the abstract) and in the results/findings sections of the study. For thesis, you may also want to read the findings and discussions chapters.
4. While some supervisors would require you to tell how related/unrelated to your work the reviewed study is, others may require you to leave this to the end of the entire review
5. There is always a temptation of narration and your supervisor may book you down for "story telling." Avoid going into a lot of detail regarding a particular section of the work except you want to use it to substantiate a general statement made. In that case be as brief as possible on it in the review.
6. Your voice must be heard. I have always indicated to students that a thesis, an article or proposal is their thing. They must own it. This doesn't however mean that they would use the first person pronoun all the time if it is not allowed in their department/institution. What I mean is that the reader should feel you directing the flow of your work with your input. It

shouldn't just sound like a group of statements/sentences cut out from everywhere and put together. Your use of linking sentences, phrases, directional words etc should help in this case.

7. Abilities/creativities of the writer

In a literature review, grouping or determining where to present which literature is essentially the researcher's task. You may want to consider grouping according to ideas, dates, areas of study etc but it is important that there is a flow of the ideas. This can be maintained using linking works (firstly, secondly…; also, apart from…, in addition, in the same vein, etc) and words that express your impressions about it (however, nevertheless, the above notwithstanding, also, similarly, on the contrary etc). These help to inform the reader of what you think about the particular author and how you want the readers to view his/her ideas.

8. Example of a good approach to literature review (the authors and the studies don't exist. This was an on-the-spot statement)

As far as the Empirical review is concerned, Ebot (2014) in *Decolonizing the Curriculum in South Africa* can be quickly cited. In his work, he evaluates twenty years of efforts by post-1994 governments in dismantling the apartheid curriculum. He observes that despite efforts, the apartheid regime imprints still remain visible in the current curriculum. Apart from Ebot, Grippe (2015) focuses on the transformations in the History programme of Grades 8-10 with similar results that there have been very few changes in the history curriculum of pre-1994 and post 1994 for the same grades. Similar findings and conclusions have been made by Iroko (2018); Mark (2017) and Mekang (2026). Note; you can expand on these if space/word limits permit.

Out of south Africa, studies on the decolonization of the curriculum have also been undertaken. Most of these, however, are older considering the early independence of most African countries. Here the focus, like in South Africa have been on assessing the transformation of school programmes used in colonial days to suit the independent nations and the key works have been Africanization and indigenization. In Nigeria for example, Amaka (1983) had undertaken an evaluation of the reforms in this history programmes with conclusions that over sixty percent of the curriculum is now Nigerian while the rest is on the African continent. These, according to her has been influenced by the government reforms of 1977 which emphasized the need to rid schools of alien colonial contents and its strong implementation programme established in 1979.

While the Nigerian example is laudable, that of Togo doesn't present a bright picture. Recently, Adoko (2019) undertook a survey of the implementation of the Africanization project in the country which

was launched in 1963 by examining the nature of secondary school history textbooks and curriculum. His conclusions reveal that very little effort has been undertaken due to several reasons some of which include, the heavy influence of France in the education department of the country….

NB. These are not real studies. I am just giving an idea of how a review section can flow.

9. **How do I improve my literature review and writing skills?**

1. Read extensively on your topic. In fact before deciding on your topic and objectives, you should have done a significant amount of reading to identify a problem. Such a worry is what is often stated as your statement of the problem.
2. Make a summary/list/table of the authors in the field, their research focus, their objectives/their findings and your observations/reflections on their findings
3. Read other literature reviews especially in Masters and Phd thesis and proposals but also the literature review sections in journal articles. Ask for some of these from your supervisor and librarians and other graduates/lecturers. This gives you an idea of how other researchers present literature review.
4. You may have established a list (2 above) as you found literature day after day. After a certain period (when you are sure you have had enough material to start writing drafts), you must group your literature according to the focus, ideas, area etc in order to achieve a flow that is appealing. Your presentation of the review must sound interesting and appear as one block of knowledge from beginning to the end. It also shows your mastery of the field (from the way you talk about each work) and extent of seriousness (the number of literature you may have come across)

10. **Presenting the Theoretical and Conceptual Review**
    Most of what we have discussed about would help you in establishing a literature review for your proposal and in writing the empirical review of your work. However when it comes to the theoretical and conceptual reviews a different approach may be required. You may want to follow the following approach.

    a) Theoretical Review

1. State the theory and the author(s).

2. Present the theory in its original form from the authors source. That is if you are using the theory of modernization by Marx Weber, it is important to present the logic of the theory as the founder presented it in his work/book.

3. Thereafter, you can state the improvements to the theory by other theoreticians in this case (Talcott Parsons for example)

4. Provide a critic of the theory (you can get this from authors who have researched on the theory or those who have reviewed the original theorists work. You must mention their points of congruence and divergence (where they agree with the theorists and where they don't) and what new issue they bring into play.

5. State why you have adopted this theory (what is the relationship between the theory and your research.

b) For conceptual review

1. Present the concept the major concepts in your research. This may come from your topic. Some schools would require you to add a section on definition of terms in your introductory chapter. Some of these terms would reappear in your conceptual review chapter or section. Take one after the other but limit your study to two or three concepts (as in the dependent and independent variables for those undertaking quantitative studies).

2. After a survey of those who have discussed the **meanings** of the terms (this is the essence of conceptual review), present the one you feel best **explains what the concept means.**

3. Present other authors' meanings, in case they approach it differently. Focus on the new thing they have added to the initial explanation

4. NB. It makes no sense, simply presenting a list of definitions from different authors which mean the same thing. If you are adding a new author, there must be something new you are adding to the understanding of the concept. Otherwise if two authors define a term in the same way, there is not need repeating both of them. This is called "gap filling."

5. Where the ideas/meanings differ make this clear and explain how it has been handled by others; ie how has the majority of the authors presented it. This may help you make a decision.

6. When you are sure you have exhausted the discussion of the concept (ie the different ways that such an idea has been presented, it would be good to take a stand on the idea you are adopting for your research.

11. Contributions to Research/contributions to knowledge

An essential part of most research works is that the readers would expect them to state how their own research would add to knowledge building. This demand will differ from one level of research to another. I often demand that my students add this section (contributions to research/knowledge) as the final part of their literature review section. Here I expect them to do the following;

1. Give a general appraisal of the literature
2. Identify the loopholes; hanging arguments/controversies from the theoretical reviews which research has not yet settled (this may just be at the local level). This may have come from how the various critics/reviewers of theories presented them; different meanings of the concepts and the findings of empirical researches; ie **what have you not seen in the reviewed literature or what confusing/controversial thing have you seen**? Such questions which need further answer and for which you think your research can help shed light should be presented here. These may further be expanded in the section of relevance/significance of your study. However, essentially, you need to argue these out here to carve out an important place for your own study. The argument is that, if you do not identify a problem to research on; a problem that others have not already researched on, then your research is worthless. You need to tell your reader that based on the gaps in research, the controversies and or disparities in findings, there is need for you to undertake this research to shed more light, bring more facts to support this or that conclusion. As I mentioned, you must keep an eye on what you mention here and link it to what you mention in the significance of the study and in your findings and conclusions.

12. Conclusion

I hope I have been helpful in this regard. Endeavor to get at least two or three important research methodology books in your area of study. They would give you grounding on these issues. Also you must know that no one was born with research or writing knowledge. The

skills and competencies are acquired with doing over and over; with experience and by taking seriously how others have done it well. Good luck in your research.