



Getting Started on Your Literature Review

Here you can find a short guide and a few suggestions for postgraduate research students on how to get started on a literature review.

How could I write my literature review?

When writing your literature review, it is essential to remember that it will only be completed when your thesis is almost finished, because new research and publications are constantly being produced. At some stage you will have to be happy with what you have and leave it at that; however, you will be continually adding to your review and will probably rewrite it a number of times.

It is always invaluable to read the literature reviews in other theses. These will provide possible structural models for your own literature review. The UNSW library now has many theses available on-line, so it is easy to locate examples of current theses in your area of research. Check out the UNSW library website for the [Australian Digital Thesis program](#). Another useful strategy is to examine how literature reviews are undertaken in journal articles, although these are generally much shorter.

It is important that your literature review has a logical and coherent structure, and that this structure is clearly apparent to the reader. It is a good idea to let your readers know exactly how the review is organised. Although the suggestions (below) are commonly used in structuring the literature in a review, these methods are by no means the only ways of organising material. Remember that the way you choose to organise your review will largely depend upon the type of information that you have gathered. Also remember that some literature reviews use a combination of structural approaches.

Possible ways of structuring a literature review

Chronological organisation

The discussion of the research /articles is ordered according to an historical or developmental context.

The 'Classic' studies organisation

A discussion or outline of the major writings regarded as significant in your area of study. (Remember that in nearly all research there are 'benchmark' studies or articles that should be acknowledged).

Topical or thematic organisation

The research is divided into sections representing the categories or conceptual subjects for your topic. The discussion is organised into these categories or subjects.

Inverted pyramid organisation

The literature review begins with a discussion of the related literature from a broad perspective. It then deals with more and more specific or localised studies which focus increasingly on the specific question at hand.

Discussing and evaluating the literature

Critically examine the literature

The literature review needs to critically examine the texts that relate to your research question, rather than to just list what you have located. Therefore, you must link the literature to your research question, demonstrating how it supports or extends the topic or the existing knowledge in the area.

You should also highlight the strengths, weaknesses and omissions of the literature, providing a critique of the research. Hence, the language used in a literature review is often evaluative and demonstrates your perspectives of the literature in relation to your question.

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 indicates your own or other writers' attitudes to the question or issue. Some ways of using language to do this are outlined in the Text Sample on the next page.



See next: [Sample review text](#)

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Document Version Date 06/03/2020

UNSW CRICOS Provider Code: 00098G

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