

How to succeed@literature reviews

This leaflet is a summarised version of the online book 'Literature Reviews'. It gives advice on the approach and content for an effective literature review.

Remember that you can get lots of study tips and resources from succeed@solent on myCourse.



First, catch your fish!

A literature search is a necessary part of the process of research, at any level. Whether you are preparing your first assignment, writing your dissertation or starting a PhD thesis, you will need to know what others have written on your chosen subject.

Handout No.11 outlines the principle techniques and tools that should be used to conduct a successful literature search.

Don't let it get away again

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Set your context

This really is the purpose of your literature review - to set your own work in a context of other research and theories that other people have developed. You are saying 'yes, I understand my area of study well' by showing your knowledge of these other researchers.

A good review will show where others have been before you, but equally importantly where they have not been. If you can identify 'virgin territory' - areas that other people haven't fully investigated - this can provide interesting avenues for your own research

Steps:

1. Initially you will need to read widely but not necessarily in any depth.
This will give you an overview of the material from which you can focus in on those aspects which have particular relevance to your project.
2. From your wide range, become selective.
Pick out the authors and works that are most relevant, that say the most about the topic you are investigating, and whose work you can use to support the arguments you want to develop.
3. Having identified the most relevant material you need to read this in depth and with a critical eye.
What work relates to your topic? Which authors do you agree or disagree with?

Remember that in writing your dissertation, or any other piece of writing that your literature review may be part of, you should have a thesis statement in mind while you work - a plan of what you hope to achieve and say in the paper. That plan may change as you go through your research, but it will give you direction, and help you to select the most relevant authors for your literature review

Set out your findings

You must attempt to review this existing literature in terms of both history and theme. The review should be more than a furniture catalogue in which every book gets a two line entry. It should show that 'the writer has studied existing work in the field with insight'.

(Haywood and Wragg 1982 p.2)

You are not expected to merely paraphrase or describe the texts - A says this, B says that and C says the other.

You should try to establish:

1. what the principle themes are
2. what is relevant and irrelevant to your work
3. why the relevant work fits into your study and how you will adopt it

Avoid plagiarism

Remember, to avoid the charge of plagiarism, it is essential that all ideas, arguments, evidence and quotations that you take from the work of others are fully acknowledged. In order to do this, you need to provide in-text citations for all works you refer to, with a full citation for each given in a reference list at the end of your paper.

For further advice on how to do this correctly you can visit the online book 'Referencing and plagiarism'.



Present it correctly

The following short passage is an example of what you might expect from a literature review. There is no fixed format and you may need to modify your style according to the type of material you are presenting. However, the essay approach allows more flexibility for making comparisons, highlighting specific areas of interest or drawing attention to areas of concern.

In considering the independent nature of cats, Williams (1983) in a study conducted in Southern Australia found evidence to suggest that not all of the feline species exhibited this trait. Similar findings were reported from studies in Sumatra by Dr. Kifzal Eppah (1987), Westcott (1988) and later by Prof. Edward Clarke (1991) working in the department of Zoology at Koopora University, New Zealand. However, what is noticeable here is that all these studies were carried out in the southern hemisphere, whereas results from studies conducted in North America and Europe produced a very different set of results.

Whittaker (1984) in Seattle and Osman (1984) in Copenhagen conducted parallel studies on twenty-five species of cat using a series of commonly developed tests; the results of which show a remarkable degree of correlation, which tends to reinforce the belief that cats do indeed exhibit a degree of independence far greater than most other species. This is in itself not very surprising given that they started from the premise that similar conditions should produce similar results. The problem with this approach is that it tends to create a 'self fulfilling prophesy' and material drawn from these studies must be treated with a degree of circumspection.

All these studies, with the exception of Dr. Eppah's *CLAW* project, were carried out in laboratory conditions. In contrast, Dr. Eppah chose to study domestic cats in their *natural* setting (owners homes) which makes the closeness of his results with those of Williams, Westcott and Clarke all the more remarkable.

There seems to be little written on the effect of climatic differences encountered in these studies and although the majority of them were carried out in *laboratory conditions* there is no mention of climate control. This is one area that this paper will address.

Further help

Visit succeed@solent for further information and downloadable resources.

Contact your Learning Skills Tutors, Carina Buckley and Helen Capstick, in ML002 for further guidance and support. Email: succeed@solent.ac.uk