

# 5

## Introduction to Your Study

### Objectives

#### Chapter 5 Objectives

##### Section I: Instruction

- Narrow and refine the problem statement.
- Develop a purpose statement that addresses the problem.
- Identify the research questions that are tied to the purpose and, when answered, shed light on the problem.
- Understand and develop the context that sets up the problem.
- Describe and define content for subcategories: research approach, anticipated outcomes, researcher's assumptions, rationale and significance, researcher perspectives, and definitions of key terminology.

##### Section II: Application

- Present a completed dissertation Chapter 1 based on the content as described earlier.

### OVERVIEW

The first chapter of your dissertation is the most critical, and everything that follows hinges on how well this first chapter is constructed. Chapter 1 of your dissertation begins with the *context*, which introduces the research by providing the background that sets the stage for the *problem* to be investigated. Once you have identified a sound, researchable problem, the next step is to describe the *purpose* of the research—that is, *how* you will go about addressing

the problem. To carry out the purpose, three to five *research questions* are developed that, when answered, will shed light on the problem you have identified. Therefore, the problem, purpose, and research questions are the building blocks—the very core—of your study; they are intrinsically tied together and the basis from which everything else develops.

Our objective in this chapter is twofold: to provide you with an understanding of how to think through and identify the critical elements in setting up and carrying out a

research study, and to provide you with an illustration of a well-constructed introductory chapter. In this chapter, we introduce the research problem on which this book is based, and we continue to use this same problem throughout the succeeding chapters to illustrate each step of the dissertation process.

The first chapter of a dissertation is about defining what is to be studied and why it is worth studying. We begin this chapter by reviewing the key elements involved in setting up a sound qualitative study. Although the requirements vary among programs and/or institutions, some common core elements need to be included in a dissertation's first chapter—namely, problem, purpose, and research questions. Each of these elements is described and illustrated in greater detail in the following section.

## SECTION I: INSTRUCTION

### *Research Problem*

Beginning researchers often confuse a topic with a research problem. A *topic* refers to a general area of interest. For example, we may be interested in the issue of change because we are living in a time when rapid and increasing changes are taking place all around us. A *research problem* is more specific. It seeks to understand some aspect of the general topic. For example, given our interest in change, we want to better understand how people learn to master or adapt to change. Thus, our problem focuses on the participants' perceptions with respect to some specific change event. In qualitative research, the problem should be open ended and exploratory in nature.

The problem indicates the need for the study. In writing up your problem statement, be sure that it refers to an important, authentic, genuine problem that we know little

about, but that is significant and therefore worthy of investigation. Ask yourself: So why is this a problem? The fact that there may be little in the literature on the subject is *not* a problem. For every problem there has to be a worthwhile reason for the study to be conducted. We do not do research because we are interested in a certain topic or because we have a hunch about something and we want to go and *prove* it, as would be the case with quantitative research.

All qualitative research emerges from a perceived problem, some unsatisfactory situation, condition, or phenomenon that we want to confront. Sometimes the source of research is around a particular scholarly debate, a pressing social issue, or some workplace phenomena we want to better understand. Basically, the problem statement is the discrepancy between what we already know and what we want to know. A research problem is driven by what Booth, Colomb, and Williams (2008) state is “incomplete knowledge or flawed understanding. You solve it not by changing the world but by understanding it better” (p. 59). The problem statement also illustrates why we care—why this study should be conducted.

Identifying a good topic and research problem is one of the most often cited stumbling blocks for students who are just beginning the dissertation journey. All too often, students have grand ideas about conducting big and important research in a particular area of interest to them. And, all too often, we remind students that, although every topic should have the potential to make a contribution to a particular field, this should not be the overriding objective. Rather, what is most important is that a topic be so narrowly defined and discrete that it is specific enough to be carried out to its conclusion. In other words, if you have too many aspects associated with your problem statement, which is often the case,

you will not be able to properly manage and account for all of those aspects.

The first thing to keep in mind in searching for a problem area to investigate is that the problem must be narrowly focused. Second, a logical place to begin looking for an appropriate research topic and problem is within your own personal and/or professional environment. In this way, you may be able to identify a problem and topic that (a) can sustain your interest—this is important since you will be living with your topic for a while; (b) will enable you to demonstrate to the university that you can conduct and carry out a logical and well-developed research project; and (c) will enable you to make recommendations that may benefit you personally, or benefit a particular situation or some aspect of your workplace. These are the considerations we took into account in selecting a topic and problem we could use as an example to illustrate each step in the dissertation process.

The problem we work with here is: *Why do some doctoral candidates complete all the course work and yet do not go on to complete the research and write their dissertations?* This problem is narrowly defined and focuses on a specific segment of the population; it is relevant to the reader and, hopefully, will contribute to the reader's ability to complete the research and write the dissertation. Once you have identified your own narrowly defined topic and clear, concise problem statement, you are ready to formulate your purpose statement and research questions that must be addressed and answered to shed light on the problem.

### ***Purpose Statement and Research Questions***

The purpose statement is the major objective or intent of the study; it enables the reader to understand the central thrust

of the research. Specifically, the purpose refers to *how* you will go about addressing the problem—that is, who will be involved and what perceptions they have that are germane to your problem. Given the importance of the purpose, it is helpful to frame it as a short, crisp, almost “bite-sized” statement that can be retained by the reader and researcher alike. Because the purpose is a critical piece of the entire study, it needs to be given careful attention and must be written in clear and concise language.

Henceforth, we recommend that each succeeding chapter of the dissertation include the purpose statement in the introductory paragraph. This notion is demonstrated in each “Application” section. Please note, however, that inclusion of the purpose statement in this way is a requirement that applies to some programs, but not all. If you choose to include the purpose statement in the opening section of all your chapters, be sure that you word this statement exactly the same throughout so that it can be easily identified. Even if you do not include the purpose statement in each chapter's introductory paragraph, in every instance that you mention your study's purpose, be sure to adhere to the same wording throughout. Accuracy and precision in this respect allow for clarity and help avoid potential confusion. This stage is the time not to be creative, but rather to remain practical!

There is a close relationship between the research tradition and the purpose statement. In all traditions, you are trying to *discover* something. With a case study, ethnography, or phenomenology, you are trying to understand, describe, or explore a phenomenon. In grounded theory studies, you are trying to develop or generate theory. Therefore, you need to be specific about the words that you use to define your purpose statement. In addition, the purpose statement should include terms that refer to

the specific tradition of inquiry, the research site, and the research participants.

You will see from Figure 5.1 that the purpose is directly related to and flows from the research problem, and that the research questions in turn are related to and flow from the purpose. A good strategy for testing the interconnectedness and logic of your problem, purpose, and research questions is to lay all three of these elements out on one page as illustrated in the following example. It is vital to complete this step before you begin writing Chapter 1 because these three elements are the heart of your study and you must get them right. This simple exercise helps you achieve clarity around the problem in its simplest form, and it identifies how you will go about shedding light on the problem. This step forces you to implode for clarity before you explode and fully develop the subject matter. In other words, to keep your problem in focus, you need to reduce it to simple terms before you can present it in more scholarly and elegant ways. When you do this, you are less likely to lose sight of exactly what aspects of a particular phenomenon you seek to explore. If you take the time to produce this simple one page, it will greatly facilitate the writing of a well-developed first chapter.

Chapter 1 is the shortest chapter in a dissertation, averaging around 20 pages at the most. Although short, this chapter is arguably the most important because everything that follows is a result of how well the critical elements—problem, purpose, and research questions—have been developed.

As you can see from Figure 5.1, the research questions are directly tied to the purpose. This underscores that you must ask the right questions to shed light on the problem. Drafting good research questions is a process that requires mind work. Research questions are often developed at the start of a project, but in qualitative

research, there is an ongoing process of formulating and modifying them. Research questions are general questions about the phenomenon under study—what the researcher wishes to learn or understand about it. Research questions are quite different from the more specific questions asked in interviews: The former provide a framework for understanding a phenomenon, whereas the latter are intended to produce the data for the answers to the research questions.

Good research questions should be clear, specific, and unambiguously stated. They should also be interconnected—that is, related to each other in some meaningful way. As such, the questions should be displayed in a logical order. Mostly, the research questions must be substantively relevant; they must be worthy of the research effort to be expended. Therefore, you need to consider carefully the nature of your research questions and the kind of understanding they may generate. Maxwell (2005) offers a useful categorization of the kinds of understanding that qualitative inquiry can generate by way of the following types of questions:

1. Descriptive—these ask what is going on in terms of actual observable (or potentially observable) events and behavior;
2. Interpretive—these seek to explore the meaning of things, situations, and conditions for the people involved; and
3. Theoretical—these are aimed at examining why certain things happen and how they can be explained.

Qualitative research questions usually start with *how* or *in what ways* and *what*, thus conveying an open and emerging design. In developing your research questions, it is important that the questions be open ended to foster exploration and

**Figure 5.1** Road Map for Developing the Dissertation's First Chapter: Necessary Elements

**PROBLEM:**

Research indicates that significant numbers of people in doctoral programs complete all the course requirements, yet do not go on to complete the research or produce their dissertations. Hence, despite their significant investment in time and money, these people never receive the doctoral degree they set out to obtain, and thus remain ABD. There is little information as to why this phenomenon occurs.



**PURPOSE:**

The purpose of this multicase is to explore a sample of doctoral candidates' perceptions regarding why they have not managed to complete their dissertations.



**RESEARCH QUESTIONS:**

- (1) On completion of their course work, to what extent do participants perceive that they were prepared to conduct research and write their dissertations?
- (2) What do participants perceive that they needed to learn to complete their dissertations?
- (3) How do participants attempt to gain the knowledge, and develop the necessary skills and attitudes, that they perceive are necessary to complete their dissertation?
- (4) What factors do participants perceive might help them to complete their dissertations?
- (5) What factors do participants perceive have impeded and/or continue to impede their progress in working toward completing their dissertations?

discovery. Therefore, avoid wording your questions in ways that solicit yes or no answers. Your research questions should be nondirectional. They should not imply cause and effect or in any way suggest measurement. Do not use terminology that suggests or infers quantitative research, such as *affect*, *influence*, *cause*, or *amount*. Also, be sure that your questions remind the

reader, and yourself, that you are focusing essentially on perceptions.

Once you have developed your research questions, it is a good idea to step back and test them. You do this by looking at each and asking yourself: "What kind of information will I likely get in response to this question?" As a matter of fact, your cumulative answers form the story line of your study.

Let us explain. If the data collection methods are implemented correctly, we should know why people enrolled, what they thought they needed to be successful, what means they took to get what they needed, and what helped or hindered them along the way. Thus, the responses to the questions should tell us why certain people have been unable to achieve what they set out to do in enrolling in a doctoral program.

It should be obvious that if you are going to ask people questions, you have to be able to categorize their responses in some way. The “conceptual framework,” which is used to categorize participants’ responses, is described more fully in the literature review chapter (Chapter 6). It is mentioned now because the design of the conceptual framework also is tied directly to the research questions; that is, each research question is identified by an appropriate category and set of subcategories. For example, Research Question 1 would be categorized as motivation and will have subcategories such as the various kinds of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that emanate from theories of motivation in the literature.

### *Additional Elements*

In addition to the problem, purpose, and research questions, there are other associated elements or subsections that appear in a fully developed Chapter 1. It should be noted, however, that, aside from problem, purpose, and research questions, there may be some variations in required subheadings depending on individual programs and/or universities. Begin this section with one or two brief introductory paragraphs in which you tell the reader what research methodology you have used and mention the site and research sample. In this introduction, you also should lay out the organization of the remainder of the chapter so that the reader

has a clear idea of this up front. After this brief introduction, you are ready to discuss the context. Following is an outline of typical subheadings that comprise Chapter 1. These headings appear in sequential order:

**Context**—This is the beginning of the dissertation; it is the stage setting leading up to and introducing the problem to be addressed in the study. The context provides the history, background, and issues germane to the problem. It gives the reader an understanding of circumstances that may have precipitated the problem, the current state of the situation surrounding the problem, and the primary reasons that an exploration of the problem is warranted. It is important to embed your discussion of the context in the ongoing dialogue in the literature. This is not a formal review of the literature, as is done in Chapter 2 of the dissertation; rather it helps you to build the case for why your research should be undertaken and to convince the reader of the study’s need and value. It is in this way that you set up the legitimacy of the problem. The context can usually be covered effectively in five to seven pages.

**Problem**—as described previously

**Purpose**—as described previously

**Research Questions**—as described previously

**Research Design Overview**—This section briefly describes the kind of study you are conducting, identifying which among the different qualitative traditions you will be choosing. In this section, you also describe the site and research participants, the data collection methods that you use, and the type of data that you are collecting, as well as the strategies you use for data analysis. This discussion should not be more than a

page or two because more explicit information regarding your research approach is provided in Chapter 3.

***Rationale and Significance***—This discussion is presented in two well-thought-out paragraphs that provide the rationale for the study and its significance. The rationale is the justification for the study presented as a logical argument. It describes the genesis of the study and why it is important to carry it out. This is distinct from the significance of the study, which addresses the benefits that may be derived from doing the study. The significance addresses questions regarding your study such as “So what?” or “What difference does it make?” Therefore, the issue of significance reaffirms the research purpose and is a more detailed explanation of the implications of your study—that is, what benefits will be derived from the study. In other words, in attempting to establish the significance of your research, you should think about the various ways in which your study is likely to contribute to (a) theory (by adding to research and literature), (b) potential practical application, and/or (c) ways in which the study might improve policy.

***The Researcher***—This section informs the reader what you—as the researcher—bring to the study. Begin by describing your background, education, and professional experience that lends itself to your interest in and knowledge about the subject of your inquiry. You also can share your unique perspectives and interests as they relate to and inform the study. In this way, the reader develops some idea as to why you are prepared (*qualified* is too strong a word) to carry out your research.

***Assumptions***—These statements reflect what you hold to be true as you go into the study and from which you believe you will be able to draw some conclusions. Your

assumptions are based on certain premises that may either hold up or be shown to be unwarranted. The researcher usually identifies four or five assumptions. These are the important issues around your topic that you believe to be true as you begin your research. Later on, at the end of your research (in the analysis chapter), you will revisit and reflect on your initial assumptions.

***Definitions of Key Terminology***—This section provides the definitions of terminology used in the study that do not have a common meaning or those terms that have the possibility of being misunderstood. These terms should be operationally defined or explained; that is, you must clarify how these terms are used in *your* study. If you use the definitions of others, be sure to include the authoritative sources to support these definitions. Which terms to define and clarify is a matter of judgment. Generally these are the terms that are central to your study and that are used throughout. Making terms explicit adds precision and ensures clarity of understanding.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY DISCUSSION

This chapter described the critical components that set in place a research study: problem, purpose, and research questions. It stressed the interconnectedness of each of these components and underscored that they are at the core of the research and that everything that follows hinges on how well these components are constructed and aligned. In addition to these major components, the chapter also described and illustrated all the other elements that comprise a well-developed introductory chapter, including research approach, researcher assumptions and perspectives, rationale and significance, and definitions of key terminology.



## QUALITY ASSESSMENT CHAPTER CHECKLIST

Problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Is the background of the problem clearly presented?</li> <li>✓ Is adequate background information presented for an understanding of the problem?</li> <li>✓ Is the problem appropriate for qualitative inquiry?</li> <li>✓ Is the problem sufficiently narrow in scope? That is, can you differentiate the problem from your broader topic?</li> <li>✓ Is the problem clearly and logically articulated?</li> <li>✓ Does the discussion move from the general to the specific?</li> <li>✓ Is the problem clearly situated within the literature; that is, does the literature serve to place the problem in context?</li> <li>✓ Is there a logical segue that leads directly to the purpose statement?</li> </ul>
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Is the purpose clearly, succinctly, and unambiguously stated?</li> <li>✓ Is it clear as to how the research purpose will address the problem?</li> <li>✓ Is your purpose relevant to your chosen research tradition?</li> </ul>
Research Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Are the research questions clearly focused?</li> <li>✓ Are research questions open ended so that they will foster exploration and discovery?</li> <li>✓ Would answers to research questions shed light on the problem?</li> <li>✓ Are all your research questions interconnected; that is, is there a natural relationship among them?</li> <li>✓ Is there alignment among problem, purpose, and research questions?</li> </ul>
Research Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Is your research approach appropriate and feasible as a means of qualitative inquiry?</li> <li>✓ Is your research methodology appropriate and feasible for a qualitative research design?</li> </ul>
Researcher Perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Does this section inform the reader what the researcher brings to the study?</li> <li>✓ Do you discuss how researcher experience and/or perspective are related to the problem?</li> </ul>
Researcher Assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Are researcher assumptions and biases revealed and explained?</li> </ul>
Rationale and Significance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Is there a well-thought-out rationale that provides justification for this study?</li> <li>✓ Is a convincing argument explicitly or implicitly made for the importance or significance of this research?</li> <li>✓ Is it clear how this research will contribute to the knowledge base and/or practice and/or policy?</li> </ul>
Definition of Terms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Does the chapter conclude with definitions and/or explanations of key terminology that might not have a commonly understood meaning?</li> <li>✓ If you include definitions, have you properly cited all relevant authoritative sources?</li> </ul>
And . . .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Have you checked for institutional and/or programmatic requirements regarding the content and structure of Chapter 1?</li> <li>✓ Have you checked for institutional and/or programmatic requirements regarding appropriate use of qualitative language and terminology?</li> <li>✓ Is writing throughout clear and readable?</li> </ul>



## SECTION II: APPLICATION

Now that we have reviewed and explained the essential elements required to construct a

research study and introduce it in Chapter 1, we are ready to see what an actual written-up first chapter of a dissertation would look like using the problem previously identified.

### CHAPTER 1 OF THE DISSERTATION

#### *Introduction*

This study seeks to explore the phenomenon of why some people who enter doctoral programs complete all the course work, but do not go on to complete their dissertations. The purpose of this multicase study is to explore with a sample of doctoral candidates their perceptions of why they have not managed to complete their dissertations. It was anticipated that the knowledge generated from this inquiry would afford new insights and so inform higher education practice. This research employed qualitative multicase study methodology to illustrate the phenomenon under examination. Participants of this study included a purposefully selected group consisting of 20 doctoral candidates who had completed the course work but not yet completed their dissertations.

This chapter begins with an overview of the context and background that frames the study. Following this is the problem statement, the statement of purpose, and accompanying research questions. Also included in this chapter is discussion around the research approach, the researchers' perspectives, and the researchers' assumptions. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the proposed rationale and significance of this research study and definitions of some of the key terminology used.

#### *Background and Context*

Although there has been a proliferation in the number of doctoral degrees granted in the last two decades, there also has been an increase in attrition rates in doctoral programs. The status of "all but dissertation" (ABD) has been a critical one in American graduate education since the 1960s, and its poignancy—and

its permanency—has been growing (Sternberg, 1981). That doctoral candidates struggle, stall, and ultimately fail to complete their doctorates remains one of the central issues in doctoral education in the United States today.

It is estimated that around 50% or more of students who enter doctoral programs leave without graduating (Bair & Haworth, 1999; J. Berg, 2007; Bowen & Rudenstein, 1992; Lovitts, 1996, 2001; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). As Bowen and Rudenstein (1992) state, "The percentage of students who never earn PhDs in spite of having achieved ABD status has risen . . . the absolute numbers are high enough to be grounds for serious concern" (p. 253). These authors further report that, for many of those who eventually receive the degree, it takes between 6 and 12 years to do so. Failure to complete doctoral programs not only represents a personal setback to the individual in pursuit of the degree, but also is wasteful in terms of resources, time, and money for institutions and academic departments (Katz, 1995; Lenz, 1995).

The completion of a doctoral dissertation is usually the most taxing and difficult academic requirement a student will face during her or his term of graduate education (Brause, 2004; Meloy, 1992, 1994; Rudestam & Newton, 2001; Sternberg, 1981). The journey through the required research and writing processes is a challenging one, pushing the student intellectually, philosophically, emotionally, and financially. Many studies have been conducted to understand the reasons for students' attrition in doctoral programs (Bair & Haworth, 1999; Green & Kluever, 1996, 1997; Heinrich, 1991; Lovitts, 1996; Meloy, 1994; Miller, 1995). The studies of Heinrich (1991) and Meloy (1992), for example, indicate the significant role the advisement relationship plays. Lovitts (1996) identifies lack of institutional support as a major contributing

factor; this support could be in the form of information about the program or in relationships between students and faculty.

It appears that many students in doctoral programs proceed through the steps with only a vague understanding of the process of writing a dissertation. They are not fully prepared for the complexity and intensity inherent in the doctoral process. They lack the necessary knowledge and skills, and hence find themselves floundering. Although one can speculate as to what knowledge, skills, and attitudes are needed to successfully complete a dissertation, and although existing literature provides a multitude of perspectives regarding what it takes to successfully complete a dissertation, there seems to be little conclusive agreement. Therefore, this study seeks to shed light on why some people who enroll in doctoral programs complete all the course requirements, but do not complete their dissertations and obtain the degree they sought. It is this problem that this study seeks to address.

### **Problem Statement**

Research indicates that significant numbers of people in doctoral programs complete all the course requirements, yet they do not go on to complete the research and produce the dissertation. Hence, despite their significant investment in time and money, these people never receive the doctoral degree that they set out to obtain and, thus, remain ABD. There is little information as to why this phenomenon occurs.

### **Statement of Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this multicase study was to explore with 20 doctoral candidates their perceptions of why they have not completed their dissertations. It is anticipated that, through a better understanding of the motivation and needs of doctoral candidates, the

issues and challenges they face, and the availability of academic resources, more informed decisions can be made by both prospective and current doctoral candidates as well as academic institutions. To shed light on the problem, the following research questions are addressed:

1. On completion of their course work, to what extent do participants perceive they were prepared to conduct research and write the dissertation?
2. What do participants perceive they need to learn to complete their dissertation?
3. How do participants attempt to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they perceive are necessary to complete the dissertation?
4. What factors do participants perceive might help them to complete the dissertation?
5. What factors do participants perceive have impeded and/or continue to impede their progress in working toward completing their dissertation?

### **Research Approach**

With the approval of the university's institutional review board, the researchers studied the experiences and perceptions of 20 doctoral candidates. These participants had completed all the required course work, yet had not been able to complete their dissertations. This investigation represented a multicase study using qualitative research methods.

In-depth interviews were the primary method of data collection. The interview process began with the researchers conducting two pilot interviews. The information obtained through 20 individual interviews subsequently formed the basis for the overall findings of this study. Each interviewee was identified by a pseudonym, and all interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. To support the findings emanating from the in-depth interviews, participants completed critical incident reports.

Although the nature of this study prevented the researchers from achieving triangulation of data, a comprehensive review of the relevant literature and pilot tests shaped and refined the two data collection methods used. Coding categories were thus developed and refined on an ongoing basis, guided by the study's conceptual framework. In addition, various strategies were employed, including the search for discrepant evidence, inter-rater reliability in the coding process, and peer review at different stages as the study progressed.

### ***Assumptions***

Based on the researchers' experience and background as academic advisors, three primary assumptions were made regarding this study. First, course work does not prepare doctoral candidates to conduct research and write their dissertations. This assumption is based on the premise that the attrition rate in doctoral programs is high—estimated at 50%. Second, because doctoral students are mature adults, they will be sufficiently self-reliant and self-directed, and that will enable them to conduct research and write the dissertation. This assumption is guided by a predominant adult learning principle that says adults have a preference for planning and directing their own learning. Third, because students have successfully completed all their course requirements, they should be able to carry out a research project and write a dissertation. This assumption is based on the premise that past success is likely to be a predictor of future success. Fourth, doctoral candidates do not always receive the direction and guidance they need from their advisors, and hence will learn informally to obtain what they need to successfully complete their work. This assumption is based on the experience that we have had as dissertation advisors. Fifth and finally, people who enroll in doctoral programs are strongly motivated to obtain the doctoral degree. This assumption is premised on the notion that people would not make the significant

investment in time and money to enroll in a doctoral program without a strong desire to achieve the goal of obtaining the degree.

### ***The Researchers***

At the time of conducting this study, both researchers were employed as faculty members in a doctoral program as teachers and academic advisors. Thus, the researchers bring to the inquiry process practical experience as working professionals in a doctoral program, having both knowledge and understanding of the environmental context.

The researchers acknowledge that the same experiences that are so valuable in providing insight could serve as a liability, biasing their judgment regarding research design and the interpretation of findings. In addition to their assumptions and theoretical orientation being made explicit at the outset of the study, the researchers remained committed to engage in ongoing critical self-reflection by way of journaling and dialogue with professional colleagues and advisors. Moreover, to address their subjectivity and strengthen the credibility of the research, various procedural safeguards were taken, such as triangulation of data sources, triangulation of methods, and inter-rater reliability checks with professional colleagues.

### ***Rationale and Significance***

The rationale for this study emanates from the researchers' desire to uncover ways to encourage and help students complete their dissertations. These students may be prospective doctoral students, candidates stalled at some stage of the process, or those who may have decided to abandon their work altogether.

Increased understanding of the research process and development of the skills needed to write and complete the dissertation may not only reduce the number of ABDs, but also increase the potential for a greater number of students to attain a doctoral degree. A terminal

degree not only may afford the recipients more career options and personal gratification, but also has the potential to benefit society at large.

### **Definitions of Key Terminology Used in This Study**

**ABD**—An acronym that refers to those people who have enrolled in a doctoral program and have completed all the course work, but who have not gone on to complete their dissertation and graduate with a doctoral degree.

**Dissertation**—A doctoral research project that presents a problem for investigation, employs methods to collect data on the problem, reports and analyzes findings emanating from the data collection, draws conclusions, and makes recommendations based on the findings.

**Doctoral Student**—A student enrolled in a doctoral program who has not yet taken the mandated certification exam, but who is active in some phase of the required course work.

**Doctoral Candidate**—A student who has completed all the course work and passed the certification exam and is either working on the proposal development or involved in some stage of dissertation research.

**Proposal**—The point at which a student presents and justifies his or her research ideas in order to gain approval from a faculty committee to proceed with the study. Only when a student's proposal has been approved can he or she embark on the research. The proposal consists of the first three chapters of a student's dissertation.

## **ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Booth, W. C., Colomb, G. G., & Williams, J. M. (2008). *The craft of research* (3rd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

This book offers clear, helpful, and systematic guidelines on how to conduct qualitative research and report it effectively. Especially helpful are Chapters 3 and 4, which offer informed instruction on how to move from an interest to a topic and then how to shape the topic into a more clearly defined and researchable problem replete with purpose and associated research questions. Chapter 15 offers useful suggestions for how to communicate and present evidence visually. Throughout the book, the authors emphasize the importance of clarity and precision in designing a viable, cogent study.

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

A classic in qualitative research methods, this text provides a comprehensive summary of the major qualitative traditions or genres including narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. Going beyond the philosophical assumptions, perspectives, and theories, in Chapter 6 the focus turns to the introduction of a qualitative study, and the key elements involved in developing the study's introduction: stating the problem, formulating the purpose statement, and generating central research questions and subquestions. Consistent with Creswell's view throughout the book is the emphasis on how these three elements relate to the particular chosen qualitative genre or tradition of inquiry, and how this evolves through what he calls "encoding" specific terms and words, and "foreshadowing" ideas that are to be developed later. The author illustrates how this might be accomplished by providing several exercises as well as illustrative examples from qualitative studies in the social sciences.

Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

This book is accessible, readable, and useful in terms of providing clear guidelines for designing qualitative research, with an emphasis on underlying philosophical assumptions. Part II of this book deals with the necessary components of a research proposal. Chapters 5 through 7 focus on the mechanics of composing and writing a scholarly introduction, explaining in great detail how to go about developing a researchable problem, setting the problem within an appropriate context by reviewing relevant literature, identifying and articulating a qualitative purpose statement, and asking viable research questions. There is also discussion around limitations, delimitations, and the significance of a study. To illustrate his model of a qualitative study introduction, Creswell presents and analyzes a complete introduction to a published research study. Writing exercises conclude each chapter, allowing readers to practice the principles they learn.

Maxwell, J. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Joseph Maxwell, one of the leading authors of qualitative research, reflects on the purpose for a qualitative dissertation. In so doing, he makes clear the various elements that constitute qualitative research design and provides a clear strategy for creating workable relationships among these design components. The design, logic, and coherence of a research study are crucial. Throughout the planning process, there are various issues to deal with. Maxwell clearly describes the considerations that inform your decisions about these issues. These design issues include clarifying the purpose of your study, creating a theoretical context for your research, and formulating strong research questions.

Richards, L., & Morse, J. M. (2007). *Readme first for a user's guide to qualitative methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

This book is designed for advanced undergraduate or graduate students in the social sciences, with the intent of developing a deeper understanding of the language of qualitative inquiry, or as the authors put it “to start thinking qualitatively.” The reader is taken through all key steps involved in research design, from software choice and use, data making, coding, and abstracting, to presentation and publication of findings. The authors emphasize the variety of methodological choices, and as such provide a “map” of methods with tables explaining how and why different research questions, sorts of data, approaches to analysis, and outcomes are associated with and fit best with different methods. Suggestions are offered for how best to go about identifying and selecting the most appropriate choice of inquiry tradition, with a strong focus on the integrity of qualitative methods. Included are useful bibliographic references for each of the major qualitative research traditions.

Schram, T. H. (2003). *Conceptualizing qualitative inquiry: Mindwork for fieldwork in education and the social sciences*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.

This book aptly conveys the iterative and interconnected processes involved in the design of qualitative research. The focus is on the practical issues involved in conceiving of and connecting the ideas that prompt and guide a thoughtful and coherent research study. Most useful is the detailed description of the interplay among the various components involved in conceptualizing and designing the study: developing and situating a researchable problem, generating a research purpose, forming research questions, and clarifying researcher perspectives.

# 6

## *Developing and Presenting Your Literature Review*

### **Objectives**

#### **Chapter 6 Objectives**

##### *Section I: Instruction*

- Provide an understanding of the function and purpose of a literature review (the "what").
- Describe the role of a research-based critical literature review in a dissertation (the "why").
- Outline the skills related to the various steps involved in conducting and presenting a thorough and systematic review of the literature, including identifying and retrieving relevant material and sources, as well as analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing ideas found in the literature (the "how").
- Offer a thorough appreciation of the role, structure, and function of a conceptual framework, and explain its development and application based on qualitative research principles.

##### *Section II: Application*

- Present a completed literature review chapter based on the process described previously.

### **OVERVIEW**

This chapter provides a guide to what some see as one of the most daunting tasks involved in writing a dissertation—that of reviewing topic-specific literature. A dissertation demonstrates your ability to write a coherent volume of intellectually demanding work. A key part of the dissertation that illustrates your scholarship is the way in which you have analyzed, organized, and reported the relevant literature. With thoughtful preparation, careful planning of

your work and time, and helpful guidelines, this *is* a manageable task.

In conducting a literature review, you are forced to think critically and consider the role of argument in research. Thus, reviewing the literature is research in and of itself. Because a dissertation is really about demonstrating your ability to conduct and carry out a research project, our intent throughout this book is to help you understand what it means to be a researcher. With regard to the literature review chapter, an underlying assumption is that if you can understand the



ideas and master the techniques and methods inherent in the literature review, this will be helpful to you in your own research.

Often students put off doing their literature review because they do not fully understand its purpose and function or they are unsure of the procedures to follow in conducting a literature search. In this chapter, we attempt to address both of these issues. We also address the conceptual framework as an integral element of the research process, and provide detailed explanation regarding how to develop a conceptual or theoretical framework, where it would be introduced in the dissertation, and how it functions in analysis.

The chapter is divided into two sections. Section I, “Instruction,” discusses the purpose and function of the literature review; the role the literature review plays in a dissertation, pointing out possible differences with respect to the different qualitative traditions; and the actual steps involved in conducting and presenting a thorough and systematic literature review. The section also includes discussion around structure and function of the conceptual framework. Section II, “Application,” demonstrates how to organize and write an actual literature review chapter. Here we focus on the specific problem as outlined in Chapter 1 and, using this as an example, explain and illustrate how to develop the associated literature review and conceptual framework.

## SECTION I: INSTRUCTION

### *Function and Purpose of the Literature Review*

The review of related literature involves the systematic identification, location, and analysis of material related to the research problem. This material can include books, book chapters, articles, abstracts, reviews, monographs, dissertations, research reports,

and electronic media. A key objective of the literature review is to provide a clear and balanced picture of current leading concepts, theories, and data relevant to your topic or subject of study. The material, although consisting of what has been searched, located, obtained, and read, is not merely a simplistic summative description of the contents of articles and books, nor is it a series of isolated summaries of previous studies. Your readers are being asked to view this literature review as representing the sum of the current knowledge on the topic, as well as your ability to think critically about it.

Areas of inquiry within disciplines exist as ongoing conversations among authors and theorists. By way of your literature review, you join the conversation—first by listening to what is being said and then by formulating a comment designed to advance the dialogue. The literature review thus involves locating and assimilating what is already known and then entering the conversation from a critical and creative standpoint. As Torracco (2005) defines it, “The integrative literature review is a form of research that reviews, critiques, and synthesizes representative literature on a topic in an integrated way such that new frameworks and perspectives on the topic are generated” (p. 356). Ultimately, your review “tells a story” by critically analyzing the literature and arriving at specific conclusions about it.

A literature review requires a technical form of writing in which facts must be documented and opinions substantiated. Producing a good literature review requires time and intellectual effort. It is a test of your ability to manage the relevant texts and materials, analytically interpret ideas, and integrate and synthesize ideas and data with existing knowledge. One of the ways to improve your writing is to read as widely as possible. Look for examples of good and bad writing. Try to identify ways in which other authors have structured and built their arguments, as well



as the methods and techniques they have used to express their ideas.

### *Role and Scope of the Literature Review in the Dissertation*

The major purpose of reviewing the literature is to determine what has already been done that relates to your topic. This knowledge not only prevents you from unintentionally duplicating research that has already been conducted, but it also affords you the understanding and insight needed to situate your topic within an existing framework. As Boote and Beile (2005) explain,

A substantive, thorough, sophisticated literature review is a precondition for doing substantive, thorough, sophisticated research. “Good” research is good because it advances our collective understanding. To advance our collective understanding, a researcher or scholar needs to understand what has been done before, the strengths and weaknesses of existing studies, and what they might mean. (p. 3)

A review of the literature enables you to acquire a full understanding of your topic; what has been already said about it; how ideas related to your topic have been researched, applied, and developed; the key issues surrounding your topic; and the main criticisms that have been made regarding work on your topic. Therefore, a thorough search and reading of related literature is, in a very real sense, part of your own academic development—part of becoming an “expert” in your chosen field of inquiry.

As Hart (2005) explains, “A literature review forms the foundation for the research proper” (p. 26). It is incumbent on you, as the researcher, to find out what already exists in the area in which you propose to do research before doing the research. You need to know about the contributions that others have made relative to your topic because this

prior work, as well as current research and debate, will provide you with the framework for your own work. In reviewing the literature, areas of concentrated interest, as well as areas of relative neglect, will become apparent, and so you will begin to identify a “space” for your own work. You also will gain a deeper understanding of the interrelationships and intersections between the subject under consideration and other subject areas. Therefore, a review of the literature allows you to get a grip on what is known and to learn where the “holes” are in the current body of knowledge. A review of the literature also enables you to recognize previously reported concepts or patterns, refer to already established explanations or theories, and recognize any variations between what was previously discovered and what you are now finding as a result of your study.

Qualitative researchers use existing literature to guide their studies in various ways depending on the type of study being conducted. Depending on the research tradition you have adopted, there are subtle differences in the interplay between prior knowledge and discovery. As such, there are differences regarding the purpose and process for planning the research design and presenting the review of the literature with respect to each of the research traditions. There are some general guidelines regarding whether the literature is referred to *before* asking questions and data collection or *after* data collection and data analysis (Creswell, 2009). For example, in a phenomenological study, the literature is reviewed primarily following data collection so that the information in the literature does not preclude the researcher from being able to “bracket” or suspend preconceptions. If conducting a grounded theory study, some literature review is conducted initially to place the study in context and to inform the researcher of what has been done in the field. The main literature review is conducted *during* concept development, however, because

the literature is used to define the concepts and further define and clarify the relationships in the theory developed from the empirical data. In grounded theory, the literature becomes a source for data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). When categories have been found, the researcher trawls the literature for confirmation or refutation of these categories. The objective is to ascertain what other researchers have found and whether there are any links to existing theories. In conducting an ethnographic study, the literature is reviewed before data are collected, serving as a background for the research question and informing the researcher as to what will be studied and how it will be studied. With narrative inquiry and case study, both “before” and “after” approaches are employed: An initial review is conducted after the development of the research question to shape the direction of the study, and the literature also is reviewed on an ongoing basis throughout the study to compare and contrast with the data that have emerged and the study’s conceptual framework.

No matter which qualitative tradition or genre you have adopted, the review of related literature is more than just a stage to be undertaken and a hurdle to be overcome. Right from the beginning, literature review is an essential, integral, and ongoing part of the research process. Aside from the formal review of related and relevant literature of Chapter 2 of the dissertation, which demonstrates that you show command of your subject area and an understanding of the research problem, you will more generally need to conduct reviews of the literature at various stages of the dissertation process.

At the initial stages, a preliminary search and analysis of the literature is usually necessary to focus on a researchable topic and evaluate its relevance. It is the progressive honing of the topic, by way of the literature review, that makes most research a practical consideration. Having done that and having

developed a narrowly defined problem statement, you then set or situate your problem within a context. To do this, it is important to consult the literature to see whether the study’s problem has been addressed and how and to what extent the issues surrounding the problem have been addressed.

Besides providing a foundation—a theoretical framework for the problem to be investigated—the literature review can demonstrate how the present study advances, refines, or revises what is already known. Knowledge of previous studies offers a point of reference for discussing the contribution that your study will make in advancing the knowledge base. As such, the literature review is a conscious attempt to keep in mind that the dissertation research emerges from and is contained within a larger context of educational inquiry. The literature that describes the context frames the problem; it provides a useful backdrop for the problem or issue that has led to the need for the study. The literature review also can assist you in refining your research questions. Furthermore, previous studies can provide the rationale for your research problem, and indications of what needs to be done can help you justify the significance of your study.

It is important to realize that the literature review does not formally end once you have written your introductory and literature review chapters, but carries over into subsequent chapters as well.

As a qualitative researcher, you must demonstrate the ability to assess the methodologies that you will be using in your research. This type of assessment is necessary to display a clear and critical understanding of how you will be conducting your study and why you have chosen to conduct it that way. The aim of the methodology chapter is to indicate the appropriateness of the various design features of your research, including your research approach and the specific methodology employed. In this regard, relevant references

from the literature are necessary to illustrate the respective strengths and weaknesses of each of the data collection methods you intend to employ.

Being familiar with previous research also facilitates interpretation of your study's findings because the latter will need to be discussed in terms of whether and how they relate to the findings of previous studies. If your findings contradict previous findings, you can describe the differences between your study and the others, providing a rationale for the discrepancies. However, if your findings are consistent with other findings, your report could include suggestions for future research to shed light on the relevant issues.

You might be asking, "What is the scope of a literature review?" Just how much literature you will need to cover is a difficult question to answer. As a rule of thumb, a literature review should represent the most current work undertaken in a subject area, and usually a 5-year span from the present is a tentative limit of coverage. For historical overviews, however, you might reach beyond the 5-year span. However, there is no formula that can be applied. Base your decision on your own judgment and the advice of your advisor. The following general guidelines can assist you:

- Avoid the temptation to include everything. Bigger does not necessarily mean better. A concise, well-organized literature review that contains relevant information is preferable to a review containing many studies that are only peripherally related to your research problem.
- When investigating a heavily researched and well-developed area, review only those works that are directly related to your specific research problem.
- When investigating a new or little-researched problem area, gather enough information to develop and establish a logical framework for your study. Therefore, review all studies related in some meaningful way to your research problem.

As you continue reviewing the relevant and appropriate literature, you will know when you have reached a saturation point when you begin to encounter the same references and can no longer find any new sources. Generally speaking, a literature chapter is usually between 30 and 50 pages. However, this number depends, to a large extent, on the complexity of your study and the preferences of your advisor. Therefore, take time to clarify this with her or him prior to writing the review.

Remember, because you are attempting to provide a comprehensive and up-to-date review of your selected areas, it is important to revisit the literature review toward the end of your study to make sure no new research has been overlooked. This step is especially important if much time has passed since you wrote the original literature review for your proposal. Thus, as your study comes to a close, it may be necessary to conduct a new literature search to make sure that all new studies conducted since you wrote the original literature review are included. Moreover, as we remind you in Part III of this book, the literature review is an important early task. Once you complete your study, you need to reread your literature review and ensure that everything therein is directly relevant to your study. Based on your findings and the analysis and interpretation of those findings, whatever is deemed irrelevant should be eliminated. Equally important, if a section of literature review is missing, it will need to be added.

### *Preparing for the Literature Review*

Finding relevant material for a comprehensive literature review involves multiple strategies and a wide variety of sources. It is important to become familiar with your institution's library. You should check on what services your library provides, how to access these services, and the regulations and

procedures regarding the use of library services and materials. In this regard, university libraries usually offer short informative seminars or courses.

Materials other than books, such as journals and conference papers, are generally obtainable through your library databases. This step is where your university library becomes an especially useful and efficient resource. Through their subscription to these databases, libraries have become gateways to information, and technological advancements have opened up a range of new possibilities to researchers. Some of the more commonly used electronic library databases for the social sciences are presented as Appendix A.

There are a few hundred databases that can link you to the relevant scholarly publications. Each database has its own unique features; familiarizing yourself with these features will enable you to access and conduct electronic searches. Once accessed, you can search according to your topic of interest and obtain either abstracts or full-text articles. Search processes are not necessarily the same across all databases. The art of database searching involves learning how to input terms that will connect you with the material most related to your topic. Because database formats change frequently, you should check with librarians for recent information regarding new tools or strategies included in the latest versions of the databases.

Aside from online searches, you also should spend time in the library getting used to call numbers related to your topic in order to find the appropriate sections. To produce a comprehensive literature review, you have to be thorough. Many sources that are needed for review are not available online. Conducting a literature search using only online sources might mean that you miss some critical information.

Retrieval and review have their own set of requisite technical skills. A comprehensive literature search on a topic involves managing

databases, references, and records. A common thread running through the discussion of the various stages involved in conducting a literature review is how to manage and organize information, materials, and ideas. Table 6.1 shows the various steps involved in constructing a well-developed literature review. Following is a more detailed explanation of each of the steps involved.

### *Step 1: Identify and Retrieve Literature*

The literature review involves locating and assimilating what is already known. To do this, the writer must experience what Fanger (1985) describes as “immersion in the subject” by reading extensively in areas that either directly or indirectly relate to the topic under study. To begin, you need to select available documents, published and unpublished, on the topic. Through your search, you will begin to identify the relevant classic works and landmark studies, as well as the most current work available.

Primary source documents contain the original work of researchers and authors. Secondary sources are written by authors who interpret the work of others, including abstracts, indexes, reviews, encyclopedias, and textbooks. Secondary sources are useful because they combine knowledge from many primary sources and provide a quick way to obtain an overview of a field or topic. They also are a useful resource for obtaining other sources of information related to your research topic. At the same time, secondary sources cannot always be considered completely reliable. As such, as a serious graduate researcher, you should not rely solely on these, but should base your review on primary sources as much as possible. As you proceed in your search, note which authors are making significant contributions to increasing the knowledge base with regard to your chosen topic. In addition to seeking primary material, you might want to revisit

**Table 6.1** Road Map for Conducting the Literature Review**1: Identify and Retrieve Literature**

- Search library catalogues/library stacks.
- Familiarize yourself with online databases and identify those that are relevant for your field of study.
- Develop parameters that will yield focused results by selecting pertinent keywords or descriptors and specifying a limited range of publication dates (go back 5–10 years).
- Try out general descriptors and various combinations of subdescriptors. In this way, your search is refined, and all possible yields are covered.
- Search the Internet for relevant information and resources.
- From all the sources that you use, try to obtain both theoretical and empirical (research-based) literature.
- Make sure to include primary as well as secondary sources.
- Identify and include the relevant classic works and landmark studies related to your topic.
- Also seek review articles that provide “state of the art” scholarship on a particular topic. In other words, review as much up-to-date work as possible.
- In collecting literature, be prepared to refine your topic more narrowly.
- Keep control: From the beginning, develop a system for recording and managing material.
- At the end of the study, revisit online databases to check for any new literature that may have emerged.

**2: Review and Analyze the Literature**

- Look for essential components in the literature.
- Extract and record information by asking systematic questions of the literature.
- Develop an analytic format and use it consistently.
- Write a short overview report on each piece of literature reviewed, including specific detailed information.
- For research articles, extract technical elements and establish tables or matrices.
- While analyzing the specifics, be on the lookout for broader themes and issues.

**3: Synthesis: Write the Review**

- Organize separate elements as one integrated, creative whole.
- Determine the patterns that have emerged, such as trends, similarities, and contradictions/contrasts.
- Identify themes and translate them into corresponding headings and subheadings.
- Write a first draft.
- Ensure that your argument flows logically and coherently, that it is written clearly, and that it is well supported by citations.
- Test the draft by inviting/soliciting feedback from colleagues and advisors.
- Edit, revise, and refine, incorporating feedback from others.

**4: Develop the Conceptual Framework**

- Develop the conceptual framework as an integral part of your study. It is a repository for the findings as well as a tool for analysis. As such, careful development is essential.
- Establish categories that are directly tied to the research questions.
- Develop descriptors for each category that are based on the literature, pilot study findings, and personal “hunches.”
- Be prepared to refine and revise your conceptual framework as the study progresses.

SOURCE: This chart first appeared in Bloomberg, L. D. (2007). *Understanding qualitative inquiry: Content and process* (Part I). Unpublished manuscript.

the earlier studies of these writers to note the development of their theory or ideas.

With the tremendous amount of information available via electronic media, it is crucial that you learn to access this information. However, anyone anywhere can put information on the web, so any information from the Internet should be cited with caution. The ease of access of web-based articles makes these sources of materials attractive. If you cannot determine the author of information or the date it was produced, it has no place in academic research. Although many websites for government agencies, professional organizations, and educational institutions provide useful information, you should always evaluate information obtained from a website for currency, legitimacy, accuracy, and potential bias.

The retrieval effort consists of a series of stages:

Stage 1: Use keywords and combinations of keywords (descriptors) to identify potential sources: Using various combinations of keywords maximizes the possibility of locating articles relevant to your planned study. Seek and make records of citations that seem to be relevant to your topic.

Stage 2: Skim and screen the sources: Assess each piece of literature to ascertain whether the content is relevant to your study.

Stage 3: Acquisition: Print documents that are available electronically. In some cases, only an abstract is available. In those cases where the material seems relevant, you need to obtain the full-text document. Check out books; copy articles from journals and chapters from books; and, if material is unavailable through your own library, order interlibrary loans.

A comprehensive literature search on a topic that covers all the necessary sources and resources is a demanding and rigorous process. It is seldom possible to find all the information required within the space of a

few weeks. Often initial search strategies may not reveal what you are looking for; therefore, you will need to search more widely in the databases and also make use of more complex combinations of words and phrases. Proceed with persistence, flexibility, and tenacity. Persistence means being thorough in your search and keeping detailed records of how you have managed your search activities.

Following are some organizing strategies to assist you in the identification and retrieval process:

1. Because you will return to the library databases time and again to continue your review, it would be wise to develop a system of keeping track of keywords (descriptors) and combinations of keywords you have used. In the dissertation, you will have to report on how the literature was selected and what procedures were used to select the material, so keeping a record of this information is important.
2. It is also important to keep track of each book or document that you consult. In this regard, you should keep diligent bibliographic citations. You will save much time by writing each reference in its proper form initially. There are various software programs available such as EndNote ([www.endnote.com](http://www.endnote.com)) and ProCite ([www.procite.com](http://www.procite.com)) that enable you to create a list of bibliographic references. In our experience, however, maintaining an ongoing alphabetically arranged, accurate record by way of a Word document is the easiest and most efficient. We suggest that you prepare a typed list of each piece of literature reviewed, making sure that all details (authors, titles, dates, volume numbers, page numbers, etc.) are correct. This list then becomes a working draft of your references. To avoid the frustration of having to search for information at a later stage (and possibly not being able to track it down), keep a close check on this list, making sure not to inadvertently omit any



details as you go along. If the reference is a book, be sure to include the library call number because you may need to return to it later. This list will encompass all materials that you have retrieved, and thus will have some bearing on your study. In the final version of your dissertation, you will include only a reference list, not a bibliography—that is, not all the reading you may have done, but only a list of those texts that are cited in the body of the manuscript.

3. Collecting literature is an ongoing process. You need to develop some system for classifying sources into those that have a direct bearing on your topic and those that are more peripherally related to your topic. You need to be selective in choosing material most relevant to your study. Always keep in mind the problem that your study is addressing. As you gather and sort material, ask yourself how and in what ways the material relates to your research problem. You might categorize each piece of material as *very important*, *moderately important*, or *mildly important*. After locating pertinent material for review, you should store these files, especially those that are central to your topic and that you think you might cite. When possible, you should save material electronically to allow for efficient and easy retrieval.

### ***Step 2: Review and Analyze the Literature***

Once you have undertaken a comprehensive literature search, you will need to critically assess each piece of material to analyze its content. In other words, you read with the goal of producing a product—an analytical evaluation. Toward this end, you need to put yourself in the role of researcher and prepare a systematic and comprehensive method of critical analysis.

Analysis is the job of systematically breaking down something into its constituent parts to describe how they relate to one another.

Analysis should be viewed not as a random dissection, but as a methodological examination. Although there is a degree of exploration involved in analysis, you should aim to be systematic, rigorous, and consistent. In this way, the identification of the individual and similar elements in a range of materials can be compared and contrasted. Analysis lays the foundation for critique. Critique identifies the strengths and key contributions of the literature as well as any deficiencies, omissions, inaccuracies, or inconsistencies. By highlighting the strengths and identifying the deficiencies in the existing literature, critical analysis is a necessary step toward adding to the knowledge base. Analysis consists of two main stages:

#### ***Stage 1: Skim and Read***

1. Skim the book or article first, noting its topic, structure, general reasoning, data, and bibliographical references.
2. Go back and skim the preface and introduction, trying to identify the main ideas contained in the work.
3. Identify key parts of the article or, if a book, identify key chapters. Read these parts or chapters, as well as the final chapter or conclusion.

#### ***Stage 2: Highlight and Extract Key Elements***

What you are trying to do is understand the historical context and state of the art relevant to your topic. You are looking at what has been covered in the literature, but you are also looking for gaps and anomalies. Although there will be considerable variation among the different pieces of literature, it is imperative to develop a format and use it consistently. A consistent format will pay off when you begin to synthesize your material and actually write the review. Begin by asking specific questions of the



literature. These questions will help you think through your topic and provide you with some idea of how to structure your synthesis discussion.

- What are the origins and definitions of the topic?
- What are the key theories, concepts, and ideas?
- What are the major debates, arguments, and issues surrounding the topic?
- What are the key questions and problems that have been addressed to date?
- Are there any important issues that have been insufficiently addressed or not addressed at all?

In analyzing research studies, you need to identify and extract some of the more technical elements common to all research studies, such as problem, purpose, research questions, sample, methodology, key findings, conclusions, and recommendations. The purpose of reading analytically is to identify and extract these pertinent components in the literature. However, as you read and analyze, you should be on the lookout for the broader themes, issues, and commonalities among the various authors. Also be aware of “outliers” (i.e., points of divergence and difference). Regarding research articles reviewed, make notes of major trends, patterns, or inconsistencies in the results reported. Also try to identify relationships between studies. These findings will all be important to mention in the final synthesis, which aims to integrate all the literature reviewed. As you continue to read and analyze the literature, also begin to think about what other information you might need so you can refine your search accordingly.

Following are some organizing strategies to assist you in analyzing your material:

1. Read your “very important” documents first. Highlight, make notations in the margins, or

write memos on Post-it notes of inconsistencies, similarities, questions, concerns, and possible omissions as you go along.

2. Develop a computerized filing system of Word documents for your literature review. For every piece of material that you read, write a brief summary that covers the essential points: major issues, arguments, and theoretical models. Include conclusions that you can draw, and note any inferences that you can make regarding your own study.
3. As you read, be sure to jot down any pertinent comments or quotations that you think might be useful in the presentation of your review. In so doing, be careful to copy quotations accurately. Make sure to use quotation marks when extracting material directly, so as to avoid inadvertently plagiarizing others’ ideas and/or words. Direct quotations also require page numbers, and it will save you considerable time and energy later in the process if you have noted these page numbers accurately.
4. Regarding primary research-based sources, consider preparing a summary sheet that compares important characteristics across all the studies that you have reviewed. A template for the analysis of research-based literature is provided in Table 6.2. A template for the analysis of theoretical literature is found in Table 6.3. These are both useful analytical tools for methodological analysis of the articles prior to beginning the review by conveying the results of your analysis, noting similarities and differences among research studies and/or theories. These tools also serve as a record of your literature search. Tables such as these can appear in the appendix of your dissertation. Alternatively, they can be included in the body of the literature review chapter to augment and clarify the narrative discussion.
5. When you have finished reviewing all the articles you have collected, be sure to revisit your entire (and rapidly growing) bibliography to make certain that it is complete and up to date.

You now have a complete record of what the literature states about key variables, ideas, and concepts related to your study. Reading through your summaries will serve to highlight important themes, issues, commonalities, and differences—in effect, these are the

answers to your critical questions. The resulting insights will give you a sense of the forest as well as the trees. This sense will prepare you to integrate the material you are reading and proceed with writing a coherent and logical synthesis of the literature.

**Table 6.2** Template for Analysis of Research-Based Literature

Study Details: Author, Date of Study, Publication	Methodological Approach/Research Design:
	Theoretical/Conceptual Framework:
	Research Sample:
	Research Site:
	Research Problem:
	Research Purpose:
	Research Question:
	Subquestions:
	Key Findings:
	Conclusions:
	Recommendations:

SOURCE: This chart first appeared in Bloomberg, L. D. (2007). *Understanding qualitative inquiry: Content and process* (Part I). Unpublished manuscript.

Table 6.3 Template for Analysis of Theoretical Literature		
Theorist	Overview of Theory	Key Premises
Theorist 1		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
Theorist 2		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
Theorist 3		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
Theorist 4		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>

SOURCE: This chart first appeared in Bloomberg, L. D. (2007). *Understanding qualitative inquiry: Content and process* (Part I). Unpublished manuscript.

### Step 3: Synthesis: Write the Review

After you select the literature and organize your thoughts in terms of critically analyzing the literature into discrete parts, you need to arrange and structure a clear and coherent argument. To do this, you need to create and present a synthesis—reorganizing and reassembling all the separate pieces and details so that the discussion constitutes one integrated whole. This synthesis builds a knowledge base and extends new lines of thinking.

Whereas analysis involves systematically breaking down the relevant literature into its constituent parts, synthesis is the act of making connections between those parts identified in the analysis. Synthesis is not about simply reassembling the parts. Rather, it is about recasting the information into a new and different arrangement—one that is coherent, logical, and explicit. This process might mean bringing new insights to an existing body of knowledge. The intent is to make others think more deeply about and possibly reevaluate what may hitherto have been taken for granted.

A key element that makes for good synthesis is integration, which is about making

connections between and among ideas and concepts. It is about applying what you are researching within a larger framework, thereby providing a new way of looking at a phenomenon. Your literature review is a demonstration of how your research problem is situated within the larger conversation and/or part of a broader theoretical scheme. To achieve a well-integrated literature review, you must be sure to emphasize relatedness and organize the material in a well-reasoned and meaningful way.

Synthesis is not a data dump; it is a creative activity. In discussing the literature review, Hart (2005) refers to the “research imagination.” An imaginative approach to searching and reviewing the literature includes having a broad view of the topic; being open to new ideas, methods, and arguments; “playing” with different ideas to see whether you can make new linkages; and following ideas to see where they might lead. We see the literature review as somewhat of a sculpture—a work of art that, in its molding, requires dedication, creativity, and flexibility. It cannot be stressed enough that synthesis is an iterative and recursive process where drafts

are refined, revised, and reworked until a final best version is crafted.

### *Presenting the Review*

A literature review must be based on a well-thought-out design or plan that integrates the material discussed. The results of your analysis can provide you with ideas for the structure of your review. To present a coherent and logical review, it is important to create a detailed outline prior to writing. You cannot begin without this. An outline will save you time and effort in the long run and will increase your probability of having an organized review. Don't be surprised, however, if the outline changes as you write. In fact, this is quite often the case, as you will need to arrange and then rearrange to maintain a logical flow of thought.

To create the outline, you need to determine how various theorists define the topic and the themes and/or patterns that have emerged. Themes and patterns translate into headings and subheadings. Differentiating each major heading into logical subheadings gives structure to the review as a whole, helping to advance the argument and clarifying the relationships among sections. Headings and subheadings also enable the reader to see at a glance what is covered in the review. With a completed outline, you can begin to sort your references under their appropriate headings, and so begin to present your discussion. Following are some important guidelines for writing.

#### *Be Selective*

A comprehensive literature review need not include every piece of material that you have located and/or read. Include only material that is directly relevant to your research problem and the purpose of your study. Although all the material that you reviewed was necessary to help you to situate your own study, not every citation with

respect to an issue need be included. The use of too many or nonselective references is an indication of poor scholarship and an inability to separate the central from the peripheral.

#### *Provide Integration and Critique*

It is your task as a writer to integrate, rather than just report on, the material you have read. Comment on the major issues that you have discovered. Never present a chain of isolated summaries of previous studies. We have stressed throughout this book that you will need to demonstrate an analytical and critically evaluative stance. Once you have pulled together all of the salient perspectives of other authors vis-à-vis your topics, you need to stand back and provide critique. However, providing a critique in an academic work does not mean you make a personal attack on the work of others. When it comes to writing a critical evaluation, you must treat that work with due respect.

#### *Maintain Legitimacy*

In using the literature on a topic, you are using the ideas, concepts, and theories of others. Therefore, it is your responsibility to cite sources correctly and comply with academic and legal conventions. This means being scrupulous in your record keeping and ensuring that all details of referenced works are accurately and fully cited. This includes work obtained via electronic media such as the Internet, although copyright protection for data on the Internet is currently in a state of flux.

#### *Limit Use of Quotations*

As stated in the writing section of Section I, try to limit the use of direct quotations and quote only materials that are stated skillfully and are a clear reflection of

a particular point of view. The practice of liberally sprinkling the literature review with quoted material—particularly lengthy quotations—is self-defeating; unessential quotations are a distraction from the line of thought being presented. Mostly, you should paraphrase rather than quote directly. However remember that any ideas whatsoever that you borrow from others require proper citation or acknowledgement.

#### *Follow Academic Style*

There are various conventions in academic writing, including such things as the use of certain words and phrases. Some words that might be common in everyday language and conversation are inappropriate for use in a dissertation. For example “it is obvious,” “it is a fact,” “everyone will agree,” and “normally” are assumptions and presuppositions and, as such, are often imprecise. In addition, be sure to guard against using discriminatory language. Bear in mind at all times you are writing not an editorial column, but a piece of scholarly research to be read by the academic community. You can benefit from seeking feedback from others. It often takes a critical, objective eye to point out gaps, flaws, and inconsistencies in one’s writing.

#### *Revise, Revise, and Revise*

A first draft should be just that—a preliminary, tentative outline of what you want to say based on a planned structure. Every writer goes through a series of drafts, gradually working toward something with which he or she can be satisfied. Often what is helpful is to distance yourself from your review and then go back and revisit. Time away for thinking and reflection tends to create “aha moments” and fresh insights. The final draft should be as accurate as possible in terms of both content and structure.

### ***Step 4: Develop the Conceptual Framework***

The review and critique of existing literature should build a logical framework for the research, justify the study by identifying gaps in the literature, and demonstrate how the study will contribute to knowledge development. Development of a conceptual framework, which follows the literature review, posits new relationships and perspectives vis-à-vis the literature reviewed, thereby providing the conceptual link between the research problem, the literature, and the methodology selected for your research. In this way, the conceptual framework becomes the scaffolding of the study. Most important, it becomes a *working tool* consisting of categories that emanate from the literature. These categories become the repository for reporting the findings and guiding data analysis and interpretation.

Doctoral students are expected to raise their level of thinking from micro (content) to meta (process) levels of conceptualization. Melding the conceptual framework explicitly within the dissertation displays scholarly maturity—that is, increased capacity to think about the conceptual background and context of the research. Engaging with conceptual frameworks is an essential prerequisite for doctoral students. This is the means through which students, as researchers, are able to articulate the wider theoretical significance of their research, their chosen research design, the conceptual significance of their study’s findings, and how their study makes a contribution to knowledge.

As research practitioners, we recognize the significance of seeking intellectual rigor, and the role of conceptual frameworks in achieving this. We have also observed how students encounter difficulties in conceptualizing their research. In our experience, graduate students seem to lack an understanding of the nature and role of the conceptual framework—what

it is, what its purpose is, where it is derived from, how it is developed, how it is used, and what effect it has on research; as such, they find themselves at a loss in the process of developing a conceptual framework. Moreover, oftentimes experienced researchers and advisors themselves encounter challenges in guiding candidates as to what constitutes a rigorous and meaningful conceptual framework (Anfara & Mertz, 2006; Ravitch & Riggan, 2012). These respective difficulties result in large part from research methodology texts lacking a common language regarding the nature of conceptual frameworks. This confusion is compounded by disagreement regarding how both theory and literature are intended to inform and structure research (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012). In researching this topic ourselves we certainly appreciate how our doctoral students struggle to comprehend the nature of the conceptual framework.

The reason for this knowledge gap is that the term is somewhat an abstract notion, conjuring up a “model” or “diagram” of some sort. Moreover, there does not appear to be a uniform and consistent definition, and discussions in the literature around conceptual frameworks are not clear or precise. As we reviewed the qualitative research literature, it became increasingly clear that those writers who do attempt to explain the notion of conceptual frameworks do not do so conclusively, and therefore oftentimes offer only vague or insufficient guidance to students in terms of understanding the actual role and place of the conceptual framework in the dissertation. As such, the structure and function of a conceptual framework continues to mystify and frustrate. Questions about conceptual frameworks that students regularly ask include the following:

- What is a conceptual or theoretical framework?
- Why should I include a conceptual framework in my dissertation? That is, what

purpose does it serve? And, what are its role, function, and application in the dissertation?

- How do I create my study’s conceptual framework, and where would I place it in the dissertation?

### *What is a conceptual or theoretical framework?*

Merriam (1998) argues that the conceptual framework affects every aspect of the study, from determining how to frame the problem and purpose to how the data are collected. As Ravitch and Riggan (2012) explain, a conceptual framework enables researchers to make reasoned defensible choices, match research questions with those choices, align analytic tools with research questions, and thereby guide data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Similarly, others contend that without some conceptual framework, there would be no way to make reasoned decisions in the research process (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Maxwell, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Schram, 2003). We tend to agree that the conceptual framework plays an extremely central role throughout the entire research process, and, most important, in the final analysis, and that without conceptual development and refinement and a clear relationship to research design and implementation, a study could remain weakly conceptualized, undertheorized, and less generative of quality data. Thus, in our view, because it is so central a component of your dissertation, and because its scope is far reaching throughout the subsequent chapters of a dissertation, development of the conceptual framework requires careful, logical, and thoughtful explication.

A conceptual framework draws essentially on theory, research, and experience, and as such it is the structure, heuristic device, or model that guides your research. You may be thinking that this still sounds



very abstract, and with good reason. While the conceptual framework is alluded to in most serious texts on research, it is described in some, and only fully explained in very few. As such, the conceptual framework is often the missing link in student scholarship. In reviewing the literature, it becomes apparent that the notion of the conceptual framework is explained and presented *quite differently* by different authors. Competing conceptualizations of the relationship between theory and qualitative research, as well as divergent definitions of what a theoretical or conceptual framework is and why and how it is used, certainly add to the frustration and confusion!

Some view the conceptual framework as a “map” of theories and issues relating to the research topic. K. F. Punch (2000) explains a conceptual framework as representing “the conceptual status of the things being studied and their relationship to each other” (p. 54). Mason (1996) uses the term *intellectual puzzle*. Maxwell (2005) views it this way:

A concept map, like the theory it represents, is a picture of the territory you want to study, not of the study itself. It is a visual display of your current working theory—a picture of what you think is going on with the phenomenon you’re studying. (p. 37)

Blaxter, Hughes, and Tight (1996) explain the components of conceptual frameworks as follows:

Defining the key concepts and contexts of your research project should also assist you in focusing your work. . . . They define the territory for your research, indicate the literature that you need to consult and suggest the methods and theories you might apply. (pp. 36–37)

As Bernard and Ryan (2010) point out, there are generally three steps in building models: (1) Identify key concepts to be included; (2) show linkages among constructs—that is, identify how and in what ways the constructs

are related; and (3) test those relationships. These steps are not always sequential. You will find yourself going back and forth among them throughout the research and writing process. It is important to remember that thinking about your conceptual framework and actually building it is an iterative process. As such, an initial conceptual framework can—and most likely will—be revised, reflecting emergent findings and new insights (Maxwell, in press; Ravitch & Riggan, 2012). Miles and Huberman (1994) define a conceptual framework as “the current version of the researcher’s map of the territory being investigated” (p. 33). Implicit in this view is that conceptual frameworks evolve as research evolves. This notion accommodates purpose (boundaries) with flexibility (evolution) and coherence of the research (plan/analysis/conclusion), which all stem from conceptual frameworks. Of interest is that Weaver-Hart (1988) argues that conceptual frameworks contain an inherent dilemma, recognizing that the term itself is a contradiction because concepts are abstract whereas frameworks are concrete. As a consequence, she views the conceptual framework as “a structure for organizing and supporting ideas; a mechanism for systematically arranging abstractions; sometimes revolutionary or original, and usually rigid” (Weaver-Hart, 1988, p. 11). We contend strongly that the conceptual framework, whilst guiding research, evolves and unfolds both generatively and recursively as the research process progresses, and as such should be construed as including both rigor and fluidity in its iterative development and refinement.

*What is the role, function, and application of the conceptual framework in the dissertation?*

It should be noted that the terms *conceptual framework* and *theoretical framework* are often used interchangeably, and rarely is a clear differentiation made. A theory is



a relationship among related concepts, assumptions, and generalizations. Concepts are defined as interrelated ideas. As Cohen, Lawrence, and Morrison (2000) point out, concepts enable us to impose some sort of meaning on the world; through them reality is given sense, order, and coherence. (That is, concepts are the means by which we are able to come to terms with our experience.) This idea suggests conceptualization as “meaning making” in research. The implication is that a conceptual framework is more than just a set of theories and issues related to the research topic. What is key is the *cyclical role* for conceptual frameworks in providing coherence for research. A well-conceived conceptual framework *is influenced by and at the same time influences* the research process at all levels and at all stages. Developing a conceptual framework compels researchers to be explicit about what they think they are doing, and also helps them to be selective—to decide which are the important features of the research, which relationships are likely to be of importance or meaning, and hence what data they are going to go ahead and collect and analyze (Blaxter et al., 1996; Bryman, 2001; Maxwell, 2005; Ravitch & Riggan, 2012; Robson, 2002).

It becomes clear that the *relationships* between theoretical variables, constructs, or concepts are an essential component of high-quality research and are expressed explicitly through conceptualizations and frameworks. The conceptual framework itself gives meaning to the relationship between variables by illustrating that theories have the potential to provide insight and understanding regarding research topics; it is the device that makes sense of data. In this way, the conceptual framework becomes the lens through which your research problem is viewed, providing a theoretical overview of intended research as well as some sort of methodological order within that process.

A well-defined conceptual framework contributes toward thinking more acutely about

your research: It frames and grounds your entire study. It helps define the research problem and purpose, as well as selection of appropriate bodies of literature for review. It serves as a filter for developing appropriate research questions. And it acts as a guide for data collection, and analysis and interpretation of findings. This way of viewing the conceptual framework locates it as fulfilling an integrating function between highlighting theories that offer explanations of the issues under investigation, and providing a scaffold within which strategies for the research design can be determined, and fieldwork undertaken. This view of the conceptual framework thus locates it as *giving coherence* to the research act through providing traceable connections between theoretical perspectives, research strategy and design, fieldwork, and the conceptual significance of the evidence. A framework is simply the structure of the research idea or concept and how it is put together. The conceptual framework is therefore essentially a bridge between *paradigms that explain* the research issue and the *actual practice* of investigating that issue.

Viewed this way, then, the conceptual framework fulfils two distinct roles: First, it provides a theoretical clarification of what researchers intend to investigate, and enables readers to be clear about what the research seeks to achieve and how that will be achieved. Second, the conceptual framework forms the theoretical and methodological bases for development of the study and analysis of the findings. Students often do not realize how critical the conceptual framework is in guiding the analysis of the data that have been collected. We stress that the conceptual framework is a practical working tool for guiding the analysis of the data collected, and it becomes the foundation for what will become the coding legend or coding scheme.

In the following section, we describe how a conceptual framework is developed, how it is used as a coding legend to sort and analyze

the data, and how it can subsequently be logically simplified and presented graphically as a model that represents the overall design of a given research project.

*How do I create a conceptual framework for my study, and where do I present it in the dissertation?*

The review and critique of existing literature culminates in a conceptual framework. The conceptual framework is described in detailed narrative form and can also be summarized and displayed as a schematic diagram—that is, a visual device that represents the overall design of a research project including key concepts and their relationships. Thinking and reflective inquiry require that you create structures that will enable you to examine your own assumptions and ask deep questions of your research. In this regard, diagrams of various kinds become useful and relevant.

Diagrams may include mind maps, flowcharts, tree diagrams, and so on. A concept map (Cañas & Novak, 2005; Kane & Trochim, 2006; Maxwell, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Novak, 1998; Wheeldon & Ahlberg, 2012) is one type of diagram that lays out key ideas related to your area of research and indicates relationships between these areas. Concept mapping (sometimes referred to as “mental mapping” or “concept webbing”) entails plotting the conceptual “space” of your research, and is a useful medium for thinking about information and visualizing relationships in different ways, developing and testing ideas, and containing the study by indicating and highlighting connections, gaps, and/or contradictions. Concept maps can also assist in data analysis in a number of ways, assisting researchers in the development of deeper insights by recognizing explicit and implicit meanings and assumptions (Wheeldon & Ahlberg, 2012). Concepts are usually presented as boxes or

circles, and are connected to each other (or not) with lines, arrows, or symbols, indicating some type of relationship among them. For a thematic analysis, boxes typically represent concepts such as themes identified in the data (i.e., codes) or higher-level conceptual themes the researcher generates. Current qualitative software packages are becoming increasingly sophisticated in terms of concept-mapping functions that depict complex conceptual relationships. Concept maps can be developed collaboratively with colleagues or advisors, and as such can engender the high-level conversation and dialogue that is necessary to promote, stimulate, and expand reflective inquiry.

A diagram is more than just a repository of thought; it is a working and living document that arises from analysis. As Corbin and Strauss (2008) explain, diagrams are “rudimentary representations of thought, and grow in complexity, density, clarity and accuracy as the research progresses” (p. 118). Ravitch and Riggan (2012) explain this well when they say,

The conceptual framework is more than just a passive artifact or academic hoop to jump through and more than a static graphic of literatures read or key concepts in a vacuum. Rather, it is a dynamic meeting place of theory and method. (p. 141)

It is important that while you may choose to present your conceptual framework in diagrammatic or pictorial form, you should be prepared to explain, describe, and articulate that diagram in great detail, including all major constructs or concepts as well as relationships among all the key elements.

Remember that there is no single way to go about developing, using, articulating, and presenting a conceptual framework. A useful starting point is to engage in a process of critical inquiry and self-examination, and to continue this critical stance throughout the

research process. Identification of your own personal and professional motivation for engaging in your chosen research topic or phenomenon is a useful beginning. Ask yourself why you have engaged in your research, what about it interests you, how your motivation might impact your research approach, what are your underlying assumptions and hunches, and what informs these assumptions and hunches. Next, proceed to ask yourself questions that relate to the broader intellectual conversations in your field as these constitute the context and background for your research: Ask yourself what some of the key arguments are, what your stance is vis-à-vis these arguments, what are the key critical questions that you have vis-à-vis conversations in the field, how you conceptualize your research in relation to these conversations, and what you hope your study will contribute to the overall intellectual conversation.

In Section II of this chapter, we explain the development of the conceptual framework and illustrate its application. An example of a completed conceptual framework is also included as Appendix C. The intent is that with new insights and knowledge regarding the role and function of a conceptual framework, you will be able to craft one that is distinctively yours and unique to your own study. How the conceptual framework functions specifically with regard to data analysis is elaborated upon in Chapter 8 (“Analyzing Data and Reporting Findings”).

## CHAPTER SUMMARY DISCUSSION

Broadly speaking, a literature review is a narrative that integrates, synthesizes, and critiques the research and thinking around a particular topic. It sets the broad context of the study, clearly demarcates what is and is not within the scope of the investigation, and justifies those decisions. A literature review should not only report the claims made in

the existing literature, but also examine it critically. Such an examination of the literature enables the reader to distinguish what has been and still needs to be learned and accomplished in the area of study. Moreover, in a good review, the researcher not only summarizes the existing literature, but also synthesizes it in a way that permits a new perspective. Thus, a good literature review is the basis of both theoretical and methodological sophistication, thereby improving the quality and usefulness of subsequent research. As the foundation of the research project, a comprehensive review of the literature in a dissertation should accomplish several distinct objectives:

- Frame the research problem by setting it within a larger context.
- Focus the purpose of your study more precisely.
- Lead to the refinement of research questions.
- Form the basis for determining the rationale and significance of your study.
- Enable you to convey your understanding of your research approach, as well as the specific data collection methods employed.
- Link your findings to previous studies.
- Place research within a historical context to show familiarity with state-of-the-art developments.
- Enable you to justify, support, and substantiate your study’s findings.
- Contribute to analysis and interpretation of your study’s findings.
- Enable you to develop a conceptual framework that can be used to guide your research.

It should be apparent to you that the literature review is a sophisticated form of research in its own right that requires a great deal of research skill and insight. You are expected to identify appropriate topics or issues, justify why these are the appropriate choice for addressing the research problem, search for and retrieve the appropriate literature, analyze and critique the literature, create new understandings of the topic through

synthesis, and develop a conceptual framework that will provide the underlying structure for your study.

Thinking about the entire literature review process may initially be overwhelming and intimidating. Instead of viewing it as one big whole, think of it as a series of steps—and steps within those steps. Tackle each topic one

by one and set small achievable goals within each topic area. Be sure to subdivide your work into manageable sections, taking on and refining each section one at a time. The important point, and one that we stress throughout, is that you should proceed in stages. Like the skier traversing the terrain, the best way to be successful is to divide and conquer.

## QUALITY ASSESSMENT CHAPTER CHECKLIST

Preparing the Literature Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Are you clear about the role and scope of the literature review vis-à-vis your chosen qualitative research tradition?</li> <li>✓ Are you familiar with all available resources including library indexing systems and electronic databases?</li> <li>✓ Have you set up your own systems for identifying, retrieving, organizing, and storing your information?</li> <li>✓ Have you made sure that all information is securely saved by way of electronic storage and backup systems?</li> </ul>
Writing the Literature Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Do you have a clear introduction to this chapter that includes your purpose statement (if required), as well as an explanation of how the chapter will be organized?</li> <li>✓ Does your review show a clear understanding and critique of each topic?</li> <li>✓ Do you write with authority, and develop a critical perspective in discussing the work of others?</li> <li>✓ Is the review comprehensive? Does it cover the major issues and thinking around each topic?</li> <li>✓ Have you included historical as well as current and most up-to-date coverage?</li> <li>✓ Does the path of your argument flow logically?</li> <li>✓ Is the review analytical and critical, and not merely summative and descriptive? Do you include opposing points of view?</li> <li>✓ Is the review well organized and systematically presented?</li> <li>✓ Do you include an introductory paragraph that outlines the way you organize the different bodies of literature?</li> <li>✓ Are the methods for conducting the literature review sufficiently described?</li> <li>✓ Does the order of headings and subheadings seem logical?</li> <li>✓ Do you include logical segues between sections?</li> <li>✓ Do you make use of transitions to link and integrate paragraphs?</li> <li>✓ Do you include summary paragraphs at the end of each major section, as well as an overall summary at the end of the chapter?</li> <li>✓ Have you checked that you have not used somebody's words without appropriate quotation marks, or stated the ideas of others as if they were your own, thereby constituting plagiarism?</li> <li>✓ Have you included too much paraphrasing and too many direct quotations that detract from the readability of the chapter?</li> <li>✓ Are all authors who make the same point combined in a citation?</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Are all citations included in the reference list?</li> <li>✓ Have all citations that you have not included been eliminated from the reference list?</li> <li>✓ Are the majority of your references published in the past 5 years?</li> <li>✓ Have you checked your recommended style manual for format, punctuation, grammar, and correct use of each and every citation?</li> <li>✓ Have you edited and reedited your work?</li> </ul>
Developing the Conceptual Framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Does your conceptual framework draw on theory, research, and experience?</li> <li>✓ Does your conceptual framework depict the overall “territory” of your research?</li> <li>✓ Does your framework provide theoretical clarification of what you intend to investigate?</li> <li>✓ Does your framework illuminate the relationships among theoretical variables?</li> <li>✓ Does your framework enable a reader to understand <i>what</i> your study seeks to achieve and <i>how</i> that will be achieved?</li> <li>✓ If you have developed a diagrammatic model, is this clearly and accurately presented? In other words, does it make sense and have meaning?</li> <li>✓ If you have developed a diagrammatic model, is this accompanied by comprehensive descriptive narrative?</li> <li>✓ If you have developed conceptual categories, are these directly tied to the research questions?</li> <li>✓ Do you have at least one conceptual category per research question?</li> <li>✓ Have you included descriptors that are based on the literature, pilot studies, and your own hunches?</li> <li>✓ Do these descriptors make sense?</li> <li>✓ Are there any other descriptors that you may have forgotten to include?</li> <li>✓ Does your conceptual framework add value to the way you and others understand your research?</li> <li>✓ Does your conceptual framework enhance the conceptual quality of your dissertation?</li> </ul>

## SECTION II: APPLICATION

Having discussed the purpose and function of the literature review and resulting conceptual framework, as well as the various steps involved, we are now ready to introduce what a completed literature review chapter should look like. In this application section, we focus on the specific research problem as outlined in the introductory chapter of the dissertation, and explain how to develop and present the

associated literature review and conceptual framework.

Please note that because of the nature of the literature review, it would be impractical to present here a full-blown literature review on our topic. Rather, we have identified each of the actual steps that should be followed in completing your literature review and provided illustrative examples in outline or skeleton form. The intent of presenting the application piece in this way is that you could use these steps as a

template and present your own literature review in the same order. These steps include the following:

1. Provide a statement of purpose.
2. Identify the topics or bodies of literature.
3. Provide the rationale for topics selected.
4. Describe your literature review process, report all your literature sources, and identify the keywords used to search the literature.
5. Present the review of each topic.
6. Present your conceptual framework.
7. Provide a brief chapter summary of the literature review and its implications for your study.

Steps 1 through 4 constitute all that is necessary to introduce the literature review to the reader. Steps 5 and 6 constitute the “meat” of the review. Step 7 is intended to highlight the main points, thereby providing some closure for the chapter. In the following pages, we put each of these steps into play and provide an illustration of Chapter 2, the literature review of a dissertation. Bear in mind that the application section that follows is a skeleton view of a literature review chapter. Were each section to be more completely and fully developed, as would be required in an actual dissertation, such a chapter would obviously be much more extensive.

## CHAPTER 2 OF THE DISSERTATION

### Literature Review

#### Overview

*The purpose of this multicase study was to explore with 20 doctoral candidates their perceptions of why they have not managed to complete their dissertations. Specifically, the researchers sought to understand how the experiences of these individuals may have inhibited their progress in conducting and carrying out research. To carry out this study, it was necessary to complete a critical review of current literature. This review was ongoing throughout the data collection, data analysis, and synthesis phases of the study.*

*This critical review explores the interconnectedness of the experiences of participants and the resources that they perceived were available to them. In light of this, two major areas of literature were critically reviewed: (a) higher education/doctoral programs and (b) adult learning theory. A review of the literature on higher education and doctoral programs provides an understanding of the context, history, structure, rules, and regulations under which*

*candidates must work to obtain doctoral degrees. Adult learning theory is reviewed to provide a context for understanding what knowledge, skills, and attitudes were perceived as needed by the participants and how they attempted to learn what they perceived they needed.*

In providing a rationale for your choice of topics, in some instances you might want to include an explicit assertion, a contention, or a proposition that relates to the research problem and that is substantiated by supporting literature. The assertion/contention should be broad and is based on the overall judgments you have formed thus far based on an analysis of the literature.

*To conduct this selected literature review, the researchers used multiple information sources, including books, dissertations, Internet resources, professional journals, and periodicals. These sources were accessed through ERIC, ProQuest, eduCAT, and CLIO. No specific delimiting time frame was used around which to conduct this search. Because of the nature of the three bodies of literature reviewed, the historical development, for example, of higher education/doctoral programs was considered*



*significant, and therefore an arbitrary criterion, such as a time frame, might preclude the inclusion of substantial relevant material.*

*Throughout the review, the researchers attempted to point out important gaps and omissions in particular segments of the literature as and when they became apparent. In addition, relevant contested areas or issues are identified and discussed. Each section of the literature review closes with a synthesis that focuses on research implications. The interpretive summary that concludes the chapter illustrates how the literature has informed the researchers' understanding of the material and how the material contributes to the ongoing development of the study's conceptual framework.*

The prior section included how the literature was selected, how information was accessed, what if any time delimitations you employed, what keywords and procedures were used to search the literature, what databases were used, and, if appropriate, what criteria were used for retaining or discarding the literature. You also may choose to explain the main ideas and themes from the literature that you identified and by which you carried out your analysis.

### **Topics Reviewed**

Having introduced the reader to your review, go on to present your topics in the order in which you have introduced them in the prior section. For each topic, establish an outline for yourself. Typically, the outline is made up of three interrelated sections: (a) introduction, (b) discussion, and (c) summary/conclusions/implications that relate to the discussion.

For each topic, start off by putting the reader in the picture so that she or he understands where you are going with your review of a particular topic or subject and how you

intend to tackle it. This becomes your introduction to the topic. Give the reader a rationale for the topic and a brief overview of how you have organized the discussion. You also should preview the main points that you will make in the body of the discussion.

The introduction is followed by a systematic review of the material and is subdivided by headings and subheadings based on your analysis and synthesis of the literature. Think carefully about how you would like to organize the discussion. Usually you would start with general material to provide the reader with a comprehensive perspective. You would then proceed to discuss the material that is closely related to your own particular study. Thus, in planning how you will write, arrange your headings and subheadings accordingly because these will allow the reader to follow your train of thought. When appropriate, and especially with research-based literature, you also might employ the summary tables that you constructed when analyzing the literature because these tables reflect the variables or themes inherent in your discussion. At the end of the discussion of each topic, you should offer a concise and cohesive summary that highlights and clarifies the salient points discussed.

### **Summary**

To provide some form of clarity and closure for the reader, you also need a final concluding summary at the end of the discussion that identifies all the key points mentioned in the review. This final summary should make reference to the line of argumentation that was specified in the introduction and pull the entire discussion together. The point of all the summaries—both those at the end of each topic and the final chapter—is to tell the reader what your review yielded in terms of informing your study.



### Conceptual Framework

The review and critique of the literature, combined with the researchers' own experience and insights, has contributed to developing a conceptual framework for the design and conduct of this study. The conceptual framework developed for this study helps to focus and shape the research process, informing the methodological design and influencing the data collection instruments to be used. The conceptual framework also becomes the repository for the data that were collected, providing the basis for and informing various iterations of a coding scheme. As such, this framework provides an organizing structure both for reporting this study's findings and for the analysis, interpretation, and synthesis of these findings. In this way, the conceptual framework is essentially a "working tool."

Each category of the conceptual framework is directly derived from the study's research questions as outlined in Chapter 1. The first research question seeks to determine the extent to which participants perceived they were prepared to conduct research and write the dissertation following the completion of their course work. Therefore, the logical conceptual category to capture responses to this question is "Preparedness for Dissertation Process." The second research question seeks to identify what candidates perceive they need to learn to carry out the dissertation process. The category titled "KSA" is all-encompassing and thus appropriate. The third research question is intended to uncover

how candidates go about acquiring the knowledge, skills, and abilities they perceive they need. Hence, the appropriate categorization is "How They Learn." The fourth and fifth research questions attempted to get at the factors that either help or hinder people's progress in the dissertation process; thus, "Facilitators" and "Barriers" are appropriate categories. To further explain each of the categories, the researchers drew on the literature, pilot test data, and their own educated guesses about potential responses to the research questions, which resulted in the various bulleted descriptors under each of the respective categories. During the course of data collection and analysis, some of the descriptors within each of the major categories were added, some were deleted, and others were collapsed. The conceptual framework was thus continually revised and refined.

As you may note, the prior narrative introduces your conceptual framework and describes what you mean by a conceptual framework, how you have developed it, and how it will be used in your study—that is, its nature, role, and function vis-à-vis your own particular study. You should be aware, like so many aspects of the dissertation, that the conceptual framework takes time to develop. As with the literature review, you will go through various iterations until you finally arrive at a workable, tight conceptual framework for your study. A completed conceptual framework, based on the example used in this book, is included as Appendix C.

## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anfara, V. A., & Mertz, N. T. (Eds.). (2006). *Theoretical frameworks in qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Recognizing a lack of understanding of the role of the theoretical framework in qualitative research, the purpose of this edited text is to explain through discussion and example what a theoretical framework is, how it is used in qualitative research, and the impact that it has on the research process. The book is essentially a "thinking tool": It is presented in the format of a multiplistic conversation about how

theory is used in actual qualitative studies. The editors offer a brief summary of the definitions of theory and theoretical frameworks particularly in relation to methodology. The subsequent 10 chapters present examples of studies by various leading qualitative researchers representing a wide range of social science disciplines. These researchers explain how they have used and applied a theoretical framework to particular phenomena that they have studied, with an emphasis on how frameworks evolve and develop over time, and how these frameworks affected various aspects of their research. They are advocates for further discussion regarding the role and function of theoretical frameworks in qualitative research. In light of the inadequate and often confusing discussion of theoretical frameworks, which is notably problematic to novice as well as experienced researchers, they offer extensive and practical coverage of conflicting conceptions and discrepancies. In addition to providing guidance regarding integration of theoretical frameworks into solid research designs, this book aptly initiates a thought-provoking discussion about the complexities involved, and as such is a very useful text in this regard.

Boote, D. N., & Beile, P. (2005). Scholars before researchers: On the centrality of the dissertation literature review in research preparation. *Educational Researcher*, 34(6), 3–15.

These authors posit that acquiring the skills and knowledge to analyze and synthesize the research in a field of specialization should be the focal, integrative activity of predissertation doctoral education. Moreover, they argue that a thorough, sophisticated literature review is the foundation for substantial research. Indeed, the academic community should be able to assume that a dissertation literature review indicates a doctoral candidate's ability to locate and evaluate scholarly information and synthesize research in his or her field. Yet as these authors indicate, despite the assumption that dissertation literature reviews are comprehensive and up to date, in many instances, literature reviews are poorly conceptualized and written. This article discusses in detail the various functions of the dissertation literature review and suggests criteria for evaluating the quality of dissertation literature reviews.

Booth, W. G., Colomb, G. G., & Williams, J. M. (2008). *The craft of research* (3rd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

This book includes useful guidelines regarding how to locate printed and recorded sources, as well as sources found on the Internet; how to gather data directly from people; how to assess the reliability of sources; how to read and take notes accurately; and how to make arguments and claims and how to support them.

Cooper, H. (2010). *Research synthesis and meta-analysis* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage.

This text discusses the complex issues in conducting a literature review with a particular focus on research synthesis in the social and behavioral sciences. Presenting a trustworthy and convincing integration of the research literature is a task that has profound implications for the accumulation of knowledge. State-of-the-art research synthesis has indeed been impacted by the growth in the amount of research, and the rapid advances in computerized research retrieval systems. Access to social science scholarship has changed dramatically. Developing a list of trustworthy research articles on a topic of interest involves lengthy and

tedious scrutiny of available items. The focus of this book is on the basic tenets of sound data gathering with the task of producing a comprehensive integration of past research on a topic. The author highlights critical questions pertaining to gathering information from studies, evaluating the quality of studies, analyzing and interpreting the outcome of studies, and synthesizing information. Techniques are provided for searching the literature with an emphasis on new technologies and the Internet. Included are basic procedures as well as more complex meta-analysis procedures and how these are applied, ways of presenting synthesized data, and threats to the validity of research synthesis conclusions.

Fink, A. (2010). *Conducting research literature reviews* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

The final outcome of a research review is the synthesis of the contents of the literature and an evaluation of its quality. This book provides an answer to the question, “Now that I have conducted a literature review, what should I do with it?” This book provides readers with an understanding of how to engage with the literature by synthesizing research, justifying the need for and significance of research, and explaining findings of studies. Key features include the use of Boolean operators for simple and advanced literature searches, the use of bibliographic software, and the systematic organization of literature. Included are numerous examples and references from the social, behavioral, and health sciences, as well as PowerPoint slides linked to each of the chapters.

Galvan, J. L. (2004). *Writing literature reviews: A guide for students in the social and behavioral sciences* (2nd ed.). Glendale, CA: Pyrczak.

This book offers instruction on how to plan and implement the various stages involved in completing a major writing assignment such as the literature review chapter of a dissertation. Useful information is provided on how to search databases for reports of original research and related theoretical literature, critically analyze these types of literature, and synthesize them into a cohesive narrative. Included are detailed, step-by-step instructions, and these are illustrated with examples from a wide range of academic journals.

Hart, C. (2005). *Doing a literature review*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

This book is a practical and detailed guide to researching, preparing, and writing a literature review at the doctoral level. This accessible text offers advice on good practices with regard to searching for existing knowledge on a topic, understanding arguments, analyzing and synthesizing ideas, managing information, and writing up and producing a well-crafted, critical, and creative review.

Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study application in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

As Merriam rightfully suggests, the literature review is not a linear process, but rather an iterative and interactive one. This book includes an extensive discussion about the use of literature in qualitative studies. The author identifies the steps in reviewing the literature and provides useful criteria for selecting references. These include checking to see whether the author is an authority on the topic, how current the material is, whether the material is relevant to your topic, and the quality of the resource.

Ravitch, S. M., & Riggan, M. (2012). *Reason and rigor*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

This book provides a fresh perspective on understanding the “why” of conceptual frameworks—that is, the functional role of conceptual frameworks in organizing data and guiding empirical research. The authors illustrate how developing a conceptual framework is part of the process through which researchers identify questions and key lines of inquiry, develop appropriate data collection strategies for pursuing these questions, and monitor and critically reflect on their own thinking and understanding. The book provides direction regarding making use of existing knowledge (theory, methods, and empirical research) in combination with emergent observation and experience in an endeavor to ask deeper questions, develop robust and justifiable strategies for exploring those questions, present and contextualize research findings, and explain the significance and limitations thereof. Included are examples from research studies of prominent researchers and scholars from different fields and disciplines. These examples, paired with the authors’ insight and reflections on the research process, vividly illustrate how conceptual frameworks inform research design, data, collection, analysis, interpretation, and write-up of the study.

Wheeldon, J., & Ahlberg, M. K. (2012). *Visualizing social science research: Maps, methods, and meaning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

This introductory text presents basic principles of conceptualizing social science research that have applicability to various stages of the research process, including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches. Visualizing social science research refers to the processes, techniques, and tools that contribute to framing and understanding the inquiry process. The authors present a variety of graphic illustrations (maps of various types, graphs, and diagrams) to illuminate processes including clarification of research design, data collection, methodology, exploration of measurement, analysis strategies, and presentation of findings. The text includes research examples that are drawn from a number of disciplines, reflective activity to review key concepts, and suggested additional readings.