Study Advice Services

Part of the IfL Centre for Learning Development

Literature Reviews

When students are asked to 'do a Literature Review', they are sometimes confused. This may be because they are new to University life, and the Literature Review is not often seen as a suitable task in the schools or jobs from which they have come. It is sometimes because they are unclear as to what the task is, and why it is worth doing.

Undergraduate students – and post-graduates at the start of a course – may often be asked to do a Literature Review as an exercise, or part of their training. This may be only a "dummy run", a preparation for "the real thing" rather than of any direct value in itself, though all students should benefit from becoming more aware of the reading material available in their subject.

Postgraduate Theses and Dissertations should normally contain a Literature Review, as a subordinate part of the whole thing. Its object is connected with the whole nature of research.

The purpose of a Literature Review.

The essence of a Literature Review is a survey of what has been written in your topic area; as the Leeds University Library puts it, "a systematic review of the published work about the topic of your study". [1]

This has several main functions. It shows your reader how your writing fits into the established scholarship in the field. It acts as a guide and reference to further reading in the area, so that a reader may become as expert as you are – or more so. It should indicate alternative views, so that the reader realises that there are other ways of looking at your material. It may show why the writer of the Review is researching the precise topic chosen: "No analysis has yet been published of the trading figures in this industry for the latest financial year"; "No experiments have yet been published which apply [*this technique*] to [*this species*]"; or "It seemed interesting and worthwhile to examine the local dimensions of [*this historical event*], as this has not yet been done for [*this particular area*]".

For a student submitting work for assessment, of course, there is a secondary function: it is a way of claiming credit for what you have read, and showing that you understand the broad shape of your subject. It should validate the research you are doing, and show how it fits the work being done more widely in your subject area.

In order to show that you really deserve credit for your reading, the Literature Review is far more than a Book-list or Bibliography. It is a Review – in other words, a critical assessment of the relevant material printed, or at least as much of it as is appropriate to your level of study. (No one would expect an undergraduate to have read all the material that has been printed in the area

[1] on-line at www.leeds.ac.uk/library/training/referencing/definitions.htm

covered by the current assignment. A candidate for a doctorate, on the other hand, is expected to be at least aware of all the important literature that is of current interest and importance in the (perhaps very small) field chosen for the Thesis.)

The important word in the above paragraph is critical. This is a word which can be misunderstood. In colloquial everyday English, it usually means 'finding fault with', or 'saying what is wrong'. In academic English, it is used more precisely. Good writers are aware that the word 'critic' is derived from the Greek word for 'judge' (κριτης, *crit-es*), and good academics are aware that judgement involves the use of evidence, weighing up its worth. In other words, a critical review, whether of a single book or a range of literature, is one in which the writer comes to a balanced judgement, with reasons, of its usefulness, or other qualities. So that if you say, for example, that this leaflet is "excellent" AND EXPLAIN WHY THAT IS YOUR OPINION, you are being critical. If I say that it is excellent "because I wrote it", I am being critical (I am making a judgement) – but in an academically incompetent way (because the evidence is not sound). However, my reader can detect my bias, and reject my review.

Be sure what is meant by 'literature'.

Literature is another word that can cause trouble. In this case, it means simply 'everything that has been written in the field', 'the [recognised] writing on a given subject'. More specifically, it implies two things: first, that the writing we are talking about is in some sense 'respectable', worth reading for academic study; and second, that it is probably therefore quite technical and specialised. What it does not mean in writing academic papers is "creative writing of recognized artistic value", to use the definition available on-line at www.cogsci.princeton.edu/cgi-bin/webwn.

So the student writing a Literature Review should aim at a critical survey of the writing in the relevant field – or as much of it as practicable, given the level of study and the time available. A Literature Review can be a lengthy study, even an independent piece of research. Many academic journals and other publications produce an annual 'Literature Review'. There are even volume length books such as *The Year's Work in English Studies* [2], of which the Hull University Library currently stocks some 80 volumes, one for each year since the series began in 1921. These are designed to help busy scholars keep abreast of the broad developments in their field, without having to read all the material published during the year. You may find it helpful to consult one of these useful volumes as a starting point for your own research.

You can also use the Web. If you search it with "Literature Review" as one search term, and your research topic as another, you may find a useful guide to work in your area. I am at present (11/05/2004) looking at a Google search Results page for "Literature Review", and I can go to a website [3] giving a Literature Review of a particular biological species, the *Ruppia maritime* or Wigeongrass [4]. I can equally read the "Literature Review: Aboriginal peoples and Homelessness" produced by Mary Ann Beavis, Nancy Klos, Tom Carter and Christian Douchant of the Institute of Urban Studies at The University of Winnipeg in Canada [5]. Neither of these interests me, but one may be just what you need! More to the point, somewhere there may indeed be one that will give you just what you do need.

[2] London, Oxford University Press 1920-
[3] The Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center's website, at http://www.npwrc.usgs.gov
[4] Wigeongrass: A Literature Review, at http://www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/literatr/ruppia/ruppia.htm
[5] www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/imquaf/ho/abpeho_001.cfm

I also see several University web pages with advice on 'How to write Literature Reviews', such as those at Leeds University [6], the University of California at Santa Cruz [7] and Central Queensland [8]. You may like to look at these: all writers are individuals, and will benefit differently from different forms of advice. You may find the on-line advice, your Supervisor, or others in your class as helpful as this guide, or more so. But here are my tips.

How to write a Literature Review.

The expected **form**, **content** and **style** of a Literature Review will vary from Department to Department, according to the demands of the subject and the tastes of the teaching staff. You should be aware of any requirements or advice in the Student Handbook of the relevant Department, or similar sources. All good writers keep their audience in mind, and students seeking good marks are ill-advised to irritate their readers. So do what your teacher(s) want you to do. This will include being relevant and appropriate – good advice for all kinds of writing; but matters of judgement and experience. No clear rules can be given.

What follows, then, is general advice that may help you; but if it conflicts with what is usual in your subject, then ignore it.

The general **tasks** common to most Literature Reviews are as follows.

- Collect and master the knowledge of the Literature in your subject field. You do not need to have read everything; but you should know <u>about</u> at least the broad outlines of what is available to be read, and have some idea about its status. Use Reading Lists; handouts and lecture notes; recommendations; Bibliographies in your text-books; library catalogues (don't forget to look in the subject classifications); etc. In some subject areas, there are even indices of citations that tell you how often a given article has been quoted by other texts. (These tell you how popular, influential or seminal a particular text has been. They do not tell you how good it is.)

  (Careful use of the Abstracts found at the beginning of many Journal articles, and elsewhere, may save you a lot of reading – now you may begin to see the point of the Abstract.)

- Give an account of your reading. Be honest; if you have not read something, do not say that you have. You might say something like, "This text is clearly important – it has citations in almost everything that has been published since. One day I hope to read it." Give some sort of view of what the text is like: "This book is said to contain a masterly narrative of the War of 1812", or "This article summarises a Marxist view of post-war economic development". Be aware that for some subjects the date of the material is more important than for others. A text in Science dated 1600 is probably not much use; but it would be an odd paper on Shakespeare that did not include references to texts more than 400 years old.

- Classify the material you have amassed. Here you may group different writers together, perhaps by the schools they belong to, or the periods in which they were writing. "The following writers on Western painting share a perspective formed before the First World War", or "The Darwinists (X, Y and Z) were followed by the Neo-Darwinists A, B and C." In the Social Sciences, you may group different material by virtue of the fact that different studies seek to investigate similar phenomena in different regions. (Sometimes you may want to amalgamate the data or findings later on in your paper.)

- Classification and giving an account of your material may well lead to the next steps: summarise the appropriate items (at an appropriate length), and synthesise appropriate

[6] http://www.comp.leeds.ac.uk/comir/people/eberry/sysrev/sysrev/sysmenu.htm
[7] http://library.ucsc.edu/ref/howto/literaturereview.html
[8] http://www.library.cqu.edu.au/tutorials/litreviewpages

groups of material. (A synthesis may be understood as something like a summary of a group of materials, bringing out their common features: "The Chicago School of econom ts share the view of inflation that …")

- Evaluate the literature. "Professor X's introduction is of immense value in clarifying the different schools of thought in this subject; Professor Y's, though fascinating, is of little direct relevance to the current project, though presenting an alternative way forward; but Professor Z's, much attacked in the press (e.g. *Nature*, [*(date) … vol., p. no*], seems positively misleading [*reasons*], and will not be referred to again." (The last of these may be too strong an expression of opinion for most undergraduates.)

The structure of a Literary Review

When you have carried out (or at least started) the above tasks, you need to consider how best to write them up. You need to organise the results of your tasks, and then you need to write a clear account of what you have done, so that your reader sees what you are saying, how you are saying it and – when it is not a free-standing academic exercise – what it has to do with your overall Thesis or Dissertation.

This structure/organisation may be any of a variety of principles. It can be a chronological [9] survey, in terms of the chronology either of the publication of the texts, or of the order in which your study progressed, e.g. "The starting point was Professor X's text-book. This directed me to the following sources: *YYY*, *ZZZ* and *AABBCC*. In order to learn more about them, I consulted the Commentaries *DDEEFF* and *GGHHII.* This introduced the different views of the London Group and the Chicago Group, the argument between whom will be covered in Section 5 of this thesis" – and so on. (All of this will be done in much more detail in, for example, a Ph.D. Thesis, than an undergraduate 2nd year dissertation.)

You may also structure your Literature Review **thematically**, or **topically** – that is, by grouping your discussion into various **themes**. In medical subjects, it might be said that 'treatment for this disorder can be divided into pharmaceutical, surgical and cognitive methods'. A Review of the literature on this disorder, then, could be structured into one section on each of these methods, perhaps with a fourth 'Overview' that treated a set of wider ways of looking at the treatments.

In other words, as in so much writing and structuring of writing, both academic and non-academic, the way you do something will often follow the material. The job of the research writer is to order the data that has been found, and then to express this order in such a way as to make it accessible to the reader. So the way you plan your work will depend on your data, and the patterns you see in it, or the thoughts you have about it. The way you write it will depend on how you want to persuade your reader of the truth of your insights (and how much you want to impress your lecturer with the breadth of your knowledge).

Remember that you cannot do everything thoroughly. Sometimes you will just mention a particular book or article. At other times, you will want to write a long paragraph. Your reader will judge, by and large, that the more space you give to an item, or group of items, the greater is its importance. Again, judgement and balance must be the key.

A general Guide like this one can only hope to give you the confidence to prove your fitness for academic study by encouraging you to take a responsible view of your material, and learning for yourself how best to manage it. You should aim to come up with an original but appropriate way of writing <u>your</u> Literature Review. (Don't be worried by the word 'original' – it will still look very like allthe others in your subject. It should, because they are all about roughly the same thing. And it shouldn't, because you are the only person who has read precisely what you have read, thought

[9] Chronological is "arranged in the order of time" (*OED*).

precisely your thoughts about it, and applied them precisely to the way you see your subject and your learning.)

One point that is not covered in this leaflet may seem very important to the reader who will assess your work. That is the necessity of referencing your Literature appropriately and correctly. Use your Department's guidelines (probably in a Student Handbook) – or look in the separate Study Advice Service leaflet on Referencing.

Good luck!

All web addresses in this document were correct at the time of publication.

The information in this leaflet can be made available in an alternative format on request from Sue Hodgson, telephone 01482 466199.