How to Conduct a Literature Review

A literature review is a critical consideration of the work by authors and researchers who have written on a particular topic.

IT involves synthesising these writings so that a ‘picture’ of the issue under review forms. Therefore, it requires you to use summarising, analytical and evaluative skills. The effectiveness of these will, to a large extent, depend on your ability to link the work of various authors highlighting similarities, differences, strengths and weaknesses.

A Literature Review is not a list describing or summarising one piece of literature after another, so avoid beginning each paragraph with the name of the researcher.

The functions of a literature review

- A review of the literature presents an account of what has been published in a particular field of interest.
- A literature review will reveal similarities and differences between related studies. It may also provide some insight into the reasons for these.
- A thorough literature review can identify gaps in current knowledge. It can help to clarify areas that are currently under-explored (Harlen and Schlapp, 1998).

A literature review should provide evidence that you have researched widely and should include a diverse range of sources. The quality of your analysis will depend on the extent to which you have conducted a thorough, extensive and relevant literature search. Therefore it is important to make full use of databases, journals, books, articles, unpublished PhDs etc.

The research stage

Organising material - To establish and maintain a focus, ask yourself questions like:

- What is the specific thesis, problem, or research question that my literature review focuses on?
- What are the main themes and relevant sub-themes?
- What do the different writers have to say about these?
- How do these compare and contrast?
- What are the strengths/weaknesses of the work under review?
- Do some elaborate on certain aspects?
- Do they neglect aspects?
- Do certain authors present a particularly strong view/argument?
- Do some put forward a particularly unconvincing case?
Some suggestions for grouping information together
Think about what you are reading:

- Do the authors fall into clear ‘camps’?
- Do they represent certain basic perspectives?
- Do certain authors provide a useful background/standpoint from which the subject can be viewed?
- Do certain authors reflect the existence of a trend?
- Does the literature suggest a clear historical development?

You could use one of a variety of visual organisational methods to group authors/articles together: colour coding, scatter graph, symbols (numeric, letters, etc), group them in boxes, a ‘family tree’ structure.

The writing stage
Once you’ve settled on a general pattern of organisation, you're ready to write each section. There are a few guidelines you should follow during the writing stage as well.

Structure
As with most pieces of writing, a literature review should contain: an introduction, a middle (main body) and a conclusion.

Introduction should:

- Define the topic and provide a brief informative background
- Discuss the kind of attention it has received - is it under researched/ has it been the subject of much debate/has the focus shifted over time?
- State the reasons for reviewing the literature.
- Explain the organisation (sequence) of the review.
- Give an indication of the scope of the review/the criteria you used to select the sources (if necessary).

Main body should:

- Proceed from the general, wider view of the research under review to the specific problem or area of investigation/discussion.
- Be organised in accordance to the themes that you have identified during the research stage.
- Address the themes systematically by considering what different writers have said about them, evaluating when appropriate.

Conclusion should:

- Summarise the most significant contributions of the literature.
- Point out major flaws, or gaps in research.
- Outline issues that your study intends to pursue. (RMIT University Library, 2006)

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The main body in more detail
The following is an adapted extract from a literature review about gender and job satisfaction, written by Alf Crossman and Penelope Harris (2006, pp. 32-33):

Example
Similar contradictory evidence exists regarding the relationship between gender and job satisfaction. Some studies have suggested that men and women exhibit similar levels of satisfaction (Brush et al., 1987; Clark et al., 1996), while others, in the UK and elsewhere, indicate higher levels of satisfaction among women (Hickson and Oshagbemi, 1999), despite them occupying lower status positions (Greenhaus et al., 1990). This might indicate that women have lower expectations and are more easily satisfied at work (Witt and Nye, 1992). According to a number of studies, female teachers exhibit higher levels of job satisfaction than male teachers (Chaplain, 1995; Klecker and Loadman, 1999; Poppleton and Riseborough, 1991). This might be explained by the possibility that men, according to Kremer-Hayton and Goldstein (1990), attach more importance to career than women are disappointed by the low status of the teaching profession in the UK. However, these findings are somewhat contradicted by those of the National Union of Teachers (2001) which revealed that 71 per cent of teachers planning to leave the profession are women, but this might be explained by ‘career interruptions for family reasons’ (Chung et al., 2004, p. 8).

Use evidence
In the example above, the writers refer to several other sources when making their point. A literature review in this sense is just like any other academic research paper. Your interpretation of the available sources must be backed up with evidence to show that what you are saying is valid.

Be selective
Select only the most important points in each source to highlight in the review. The type of information you choose to mention should relate directly to the review's focus, whether it is thematic, methodological, or chronological.

Summarise and synthesise
Remember to summarise and combine your sources within each paragraph throughout the review. The authors here sum up important features of the various studies and combine them to illustrate the extent of the ‘contradictory evidence’ that exists.

Organise paragraphs
An effective literature review depends on well-structured paragraphs. Each one should begin with a topic sentence clearly stating the main issue of the paragraph, followed by a discussion of that issue using the work of various authors.
Quotes
In the given example, Crossman and Harris do not overuse direct quotes. That is because the survey nature of the literature review does not allow for in-depth discussion or detailed quotes from the text. Some short quotes here and there are okay, though, if you want to emphasize a point, or if what the author said just cannot be rewritten in your own words. Notice that Crossman and Harris do quote certain terms that were coined by the author, not common knowledge, or taken directly from the study. It is advisable to use quotes sparingly. Longer quotations, in particular, should be limited to an absolute minimum.

Use caution when paraphrasing
When paraphrasing a source that is not your own, be sure to represent the author’s information or opinions accurately and in your own words. In the preceding example, Crossman and Harris either directly refer to the author of their source in the text, such as Kremer-Hayton and Goldstein, or they provide ample notation, provided in brackets, in the text when the ideas they are mentioning are not their own, for example (Greenhaus et al., 1990).

Keep your own voice
Finally, while the literature review presents others' ideas, your voice (the writer's) should be clearly evident. You should still maintain your own voice by starting and ending the paragraph with your own ideas/statements expressed in your own words (University of North Carolina, 2010-2011).

References and further reading:


