The Literature Review

Research projects require that a literature review be done to ensure that you are aware of the subject and not just repeating research already done. By definition, a literature review is exhaustive; however, the length varies with the type of document being prepared e.g. Thesis, research article, grant proposal, final year project.

The first purpose is to demonstrate your understanding of your field by critically analyzing the pertinent work of other investigators leading up to your proposed work. This shows that you are able to appreciate the salient contributions of other scientists upon whose work your study builds.

Make certain that the significance of your proposed work is clearly shown. This is not the same as showing that the issue/problem to which your research relates is significant. A lot of investigators become confused about this distinction. For example, some researchers often argue that the issue to which their research relates is significant. Rather, what the readers are looking for is the impact of your research on the issue in question.

Preparing the Literature Review

- Decide what types of sources (books, journal articles, websites, multimedia) maybe relevant? Cite the major research in your area to ensure that you are aware of the scientific literature in your discipline.
- Find models - Look for other literature reviews in your area of interest or in the discipline and read them to get a sense of the types of themes you might want to look for in your own research or ways to organize your final review. The bibliography or reference section of sources you've already read are also excellent entry points into your own research.
- Read abstracts first to determine relevance but don’t try to read everything. Make proper notes and bibliographic citations from the beginning. For reports discussed by other writers find original report to assess yourself. Do not use abstracts as your source of information unless it is the only item you can find, you must consult the full-text of the article before using it as a cited reference. Note which items are opinions and which are research-based.
- Narrow/broaden your topic, as necessary. Consider whether your sources are current – this could be essential in the health/medical field depending on the topic.
- Group research studies and other types of literature (reviews, theoretical articles, case studies, etc.) according to common denominators such as qualitative versus quantitative approaches, conclusions of authors, specific purpose or objective, chronology, etc.
- Summarize individual studies or articles with as much or as little detail as each merits according to its comparative importance in the literature, remembering that space (length) granted in the literature review denotes significance. Read critically.

Strategies:

- Find a focus - As you read, widely but selectively, on your topic, consider instead what themes or issues connect your sources together. Do they present one or different solutions? Is there an aspect of the field that is missing? How well do they present the material and do they portray it according to an appropriate theory? Do they reveal a trend in the field? A raging debate? Pick one of these themes to focus the organization of your review.
- Consider organisation - What are the most important topics, subtopics, etc., that your review needs to include? And in what order should you present them? Develop an organization for your review at both a global and local level.
  - **Introduction:** Gives a quick idea of the topic of the literature review, such as the central theme or organizational pattern.
  - **Body:** Contains your discussion of sources and is organized chronologically, thematically, or methodologically (see below for more information on each).
Organizing the body

- Chronological: If your review follows the chronological method, you could write about the materials according to when they were published.
- By Publication: Order your sources by publication chronology, only if the order demonstrates a more important trend.
- By Trend: A better way to organize the above sources chronologically is to examine the sources under another trend. Then your review would have subsections according to eras within this period.
- Thematic: Thematic reviews of literature are organized around a topic or issue, rather than the progression of time. However, progression of time may still be an important factor in a thematic review. But more authentic thematic reviews tend to break away from chronological order.
- Methodological: A methodological approach differs from the two above in that the focusing factor usually does not have to do with the content of the material. A methodological scope will influence either the types of documents in the review or the way in which these documents are discussed.

You can also include the following if appropriate:

  - Current Situation: Information necessary to understand the topic or focus of the literature review.
  - History: The chronological progression of the field, the literature, or an idea that is necessary to understand the literature review, if the body of the literature review is not already a chronology.
  - Methods and/or Standards: The criteria you used to select the sources in your literature review or the way in which you present your information. For instance, you might explain that your review includes only peer-reviewed articles and journals.
  - Questions for Further Research: What questions about the field has the review sparked? How will you further your research as a result of the review?
  - Conclusions/Recommendations: Discuss what you have drawn from reviewing literature so far. Where might the discussion proceed?

**Remember to**

- Use evidence - Your interpretation of the available sources must be backed up with evidence to show that what you are saying is valid.
- Use references to justify or support argument; to allow you to make comparisons; to express ideas much better than you could; to demonstrate familiarity with the literature.
- 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.
- Summarize and synthesize - Remember to summarize and synthesize your sources within each paragraph as well as throughout the review.
- Keep your own voice - While the literature review presents others' ideas, your voice (the writer's) should remain front and centre.
- 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. Cite.
- You can provide the reader with strong "umbrella" sentences at beginnings of paragraphs, "signposts" throughout, and brief "so what" summary sentences at intermediate points in the review to aid in understanding comparisons and analyses.
- Revise, rewrite, use terminology familiar to your audience; get rid of unnecessary jargon or slang. Use headings, subheadings, transitional phrases; Report should reflect thought, structure, logic and coherence; Proper grammar, expressions, evidence of abstract/conceptual thinking; Use past tense to report research already done, present tense for general ideas not bound by a single time period.
- Use appropriate language – narrative, expository, scientific, objective, impersonal tone. Finally, double check that you've documented your sources and formatted the review and references appropriately for your discipline.

Shamin Renwick – Sep 2016