

How to carry out a literature review for a dissertation or research paper

By Margaret Adolphus

The purpose of the literature review

All literature reviews should be more than a mere description of the current state of knowledge of an area, and should critically evaluate the theoretical positions and research studies, drawing attention to major debates. This is particularly true for a research dissertation or paper, which should go one step further by using the review to situate the author's own contribution to knowledge.

The literature review has been described as a "report of primary scholarship" (Cooper, 1988) and "an interpretation and synthesis of published work" (Merriam, 1988, quoted by Murray, 2002). The two key words here are **scholarship** and **synthesis**: a literature review relates particular research to the a wider field.

There are two main purposes of a literature review:

1. **To show awareness of the present state of knowledge of a particular field.** Not just who has written what, but the main empirical research, theoretical positions, controversies, and breakthroughs as well as links with other related areas of knowledge.
2. **To provide a foundation for the author's research.** The process of reviewing the literature should provide, according to Steane (2004: p. 124), a rationale for the choice of problem to be investigated and the methodology selected. It should help the researcher define a hypothesis or a research question, and show how answering the question will contribute to the body of knowledge. Analysis of the literature can also help provide a particular theoretical lens, support the argument, or identify gaps.

How to approach the literature review: organization

The author of an undergraduate essay may work from a reading list supplied by the relevant faculty member; the research student needs to cast his or her net far wider, over the whole field of literature relevant to the study. This is clearly a major task and requires organization.

Stages of writing a literature review

There are essentially four main stages of writing a literature review:

1. Defining the topic area of investigation.
2. Locating the key literature – this is the literature search.
3. Analysing the literature.
4. Structuring and writing the literature review.

The last three items will be dealt with separately; here are a few points on general approach and organization.

General approach and organization

The topic area of investigation may initially be fairly broad; part of the function of the literature review is to refine it to a subject of the right size, and home in on a particular question. Initially it is important to identify the concepts within the overall topic.

Oliver (2004) provides an excellent example here: quality assurance in distance learning in higher education. He points out the need to look at literature on each of the concepts – quality assurance, higher education, and distance learning – as there may be too little literature on three, or even two, concepts together. Indeed, one reason why little literature may be found is that the initial question may be framed too narrowly.

Conversely, if the literature review reveals vast amounts of literature, the initial question needs to be framed more narrowly. (For example, if your topic had been "distance learning in higher education", you would almost certainly end up with a vast amount of citations.)

Examples

- In "Principles of corporate rebranding", Merrilees and Miller (2008) consider not only corporate rebranding, but also corporate branding.
- In "Relational and economic antecedents of organisational commitment", San Martín (2008) looks at the literature on organizational commitment, relational antecedents and economic antecedents.

Carrying out a literature review should be both serendipitous and systematic.

Serendipitous because the process is rarely linear. Steane (2004) uses the analogy of a river trip with expeditions down tributaries and creeks. Searching a database may throw up a list of citations and the temptation is to look through them methodically. However, you may find that a particular article throws up interesting-looking references, so you are off on a tributary.

Systematic because whether you follow a list of database references, or jump directly to the citations of a particular article, you need a system of keeping records. These should in the first instance be bibliographic (author, date, title of article/chapter, publication, volume and issue number, edition, etc.). However, you should also keep a record of notes on the content; many suggest providing a brief analysis (we will review structures for this in the next section) as opposed to free-style notes.

What search terms will you use?

The most obvious way of searching is to use keywords based on the main concepts you have identified. However, you may be conscious of key scholars in the field, either from general reading or from talking to your supervisor, in which case you will want to search for them by name.

What will you search?

What type of literature will you look for? The basis of dissertation research is overwhelmingly likely to be scholarly articles, which are found in peer reviewed journals. Textbooks, encyclopedias, etc. generally report established knowledge rather than original research but are useful to get an overview of a particular issue and deepen your understanding.

Chapters from edited books may contain empirical research or conceptual analysis, and so may be suitable. Some major research studies are published in monographs or reports from government departments. If you are researching a topic with a strong applied content, you may well want to broaden your search to look at the practitioner literature, in order to consider the main debates among professionals.

Where will you search?

Familiarity with the main databases in your area is essential, and you will find it useful to talk to your subject librarian who will probably have a better idea of what is available than even an academic specialist.

Remember that some key journals may not be on databases and it is also a good idea to do an individual search of any key publications. You will almost certainly want to search the Internet itself, and while this may be a useful source of pre-printed articles, there are also huge pitfalls; see the guide "[How to write a literature review](#)" for how not to fall into these.

Example

In their review of food handling studies (2003), Redmond and Griffiths searched the Foodsafe listserv from which they were able to obtain many unpublished international studies.

The literature itself may be a source of good leads: look for existing literature reviews on your subject/similar subjects. Also, keep an eye open for names which appear more than once: these are likely to be the key scholars in the area.

Finally, ask your supervisor and other established authorities in the area, who may be able not only to point you in useful directions, but also help you define your topic.

How old/recent?

While there are special circumstances for using old sources, for example in a historical study, the accepted practice is to use literature that is as recent as possible. This is because scholarship is cumulative, building on previous work.

It is also a common complaint of journal editors that papers submitted often contain references which are "woefully out of date".

The exception is work which is seminal; for example, all work which uses grounded theory will refer to the 1967 work of Glaser and Strauss.

Should one set boundaries for the search?

One of the reasons for analysing the concepts involved in one's topic is to ensure that you are casting your searching net sufficiently widely. If, in the "quality assurance in distance learning in higher education" example quoted in part 2, your search string had been "quality assurance" **and** "distance learning" **and** "higher education", you might have got very few results.

The topic will therefore be the main tool for setting boundaries in one's research, but there are others if the amount of citations is likely to be unwieldy. One is to review a particular type of literature – for example only to look at research-based articles and not at grey literature.

Example

In "Universities in a competitive global marketplace", Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) prioritize empirical research in scholarly journals, and exclude unpublished conference papers and opinion pieces in professional publications. They wanted to keep the focus on the research question and the latter would not have provided relevant information.

You can also limit your search by date. In the above example, the authors use the starting date of 1992 as the year when former polytechnics became universities in the UK.

It is obvious that whatever limiting criteria you choose should not be arbitrary, but should make sense in terms of the research. You will need to explain and justify your decision, as in the example below:

Example

In "A review of consumer food safety studies", Redmond and Griffith (2003: p. 113) confine their evaluation to individual and targeted groups of consumers on the grounds that trained food handlers are safer than consumers, using published research to justify this claim. Had they used studies of the former, they might have introduced bias into the research.

How long should you search for?

While you are still finding divergent views and new information, your search should continue. If on the other hand you are not finding anything new, then this will be the time to stop.

Systematic literature reviews

A systematic literature review is a review where all procedures are documented – the research audit trail of databases and search terms used is made explicit.

Systematic reviews were originally developed in the field of medicine, through the Cochrane Collaboration (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). Its origin lies in the field of evidence-based health care, but it has also been adopted by researchers in education and management.

Because of its rigorous approach and transparent methodology, it helps eliminate bias from the selection of literature, and hence create a reliable knowledge base. A systematic review involves adopting a "replicable, scientific and transparent" approach and providing an "audit trail of reviewers' decisions, procedures and conclusions" (Moustaghfir, 2008). The search process inevitably throws up a very large number of papers which are then reviewed according to agreed criteria for inclusion, often by a reviewing panel.

List of what may be part of a described approach

- The type of literature searched, and excluded (e.g. articles in particular types of journals, but not conference papers, dissertations, textbooks) giving the reason.
- The method of classification – for example, years of publication, theme.
- Databases, search and thesaurus terms.
- Any other type of searching used, for example manual searching.
- Limiting criteria, for example dates, geographical coverage, type of publication, size of firm (e.g. just SMEs).

- Tracking method for citations.
- How the papers were analysed.
- What the criteria were for inclusion and exclusion in the final review.

An example of a systematic approach

In "Universities in a competitive global marketplace", Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) conduct a literature review of higher education marketing in an international context.

They list the business management and education databases they used as well as their hand and Internet searches with which they located secondary references and further publications by identified authors.

For their search strings they combined "higher education" or "university[ies]" with various thesaurus-obtained terms for marketing:

- branding;
- markets [**not** labour markets];
- marketing;
- marketization;
- positioning;
- segmentation; and
- targeting.

The intention was to create a search that was simultaneously thorough and likely to yield the most relevant examples. The start date of 1992 was justified as this was the year when polytechnics became universities. Priority was given to reports of empirical research. The authors also provide a thorough description of their framework of analysis and reporting.

Moustaghfir (2008) describes the stages followed in the systematic review, which is based on the methodology of Tranfield *et al.* (2003):

1. Produce a review protocol for the review, with a consultation panel.
2. Identify keywords, and construct these into search strings.
3. Select databases.
4. Analyse identified papers (via their abstracts) and evaluate according to the agreed inclusion/exclusion criteria.
5. Import selected papers into a reference management database (in this case, Procite). These papers are then subject to a process which he terms "peer review" according to set quality assessment criteria:
 - An explicit account of the theory.
 - Succinct statement of objectives.
 - Clear description of context.
 - Adequately chosen sample.
 - Appropriate data analysis method clearly described.
 - Appropriate interpretation of data.
 - Findings relevant to theory.
6. Grounded theory was used to synthesize the information, and generate assumptions.

Analysing and synthesizing the literature

Steane (2004) suggests that there should be two stages to the literature review:

1. when you trawl through, and analyse, the articles you have identified,

2. when you actually write up the literature review.

While both processes of review should be critical, the former will deal with items on an individual basis, whereas the latter will compare and contrast: in other words, synthesize.

The following are appropriate headings for evaluation (although Moustaghfir's criteria quoted above could also be applied). You should not be afraid to criticize any shortcomings.

- Aims and objectives.
- Central thesis.
- Outcomes.
- Theoretical framework.
- Context and background.
- Research design and method.
- Findings.
- Contribution to the field.

Example

In "Universities in a competitive global marketplace", Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) describe how "each empirical research paper was subjected to a thorough review, using a standard framework to extract key information about the purpose; the definition of marketing used for the study; design sampling, methodology, findings and implications of the study".

Note that many supervisors encourage students to start writing early in order to get into practice and avoid later writer's block. To do a short piece of writing based on the above criteria for each paper can be a useful exercise.

Between the first and second stages, there should be a process of selection: not everything you read will go into your final literature review. You should only include that which is relevant to your research topic. It may be tempting to have a very long list of references, but examiners will only get annoyed by a lengthy literature review which includes citations of little relevance.

There should also be a stage when you look at the overlap between studies, when you compare and contrast and recognize patterns. This will help you towards your synthesis of literature: you know what you are going to include and why, and can now write your overview.

This overview should:

- identify the key contributions in the field,
- recognize the main debates and theoretical positions,
- categorize studies by their assumptions and approaches,
- point out gaps in knowledge and weaknesses in theoretical or empirical positions, and
- above all state the ways in which your own contribution fits into the picture.

Examples

In "Value-informed pricing in its organizational context: literature review, conceptual framework, and directions for future research", Ingenbleek (2007) identifies the seminal study by two pre-war researchers, Hall and Hitch (1939), which first studied pricing practice, and whose views led to heated debate.

In her literature review of the role of a board director, Petrovic (2008) identifies that one view is that the former is influenced by strategic direction and control, while another sees roles created by individual board directors.

In "A review of consumer food safety studies", Redmond and Griffith (2003) describe how they examined the studies according to social cognitive components, observed behaviours, and food safety findings.

Structuring and writing the literature review

Once you have an overview of the literature, you are ready to begin writing. In this section, we shall look at the position of the literature review, how it should be structured, and the style you should use to write it.

Where to place the literature review

A standard (but by no means always universal) way of organizing a thesis is:

- introduction stating the aims and objectives,
- literature review,
- research methods,
- data analysis,
- findings and discussion.

Most empirical research articles follow the same pattern.

The literature review chapter is in a pivotal position, after the aims and objectives but before the actual description of the research. The actual research question is likely to come out of the literature review. Sometimes, discussion of the literature takes place over several chapters, for example the methodology chapter might contain some discussion of different research approaches.

The structure of the literature review

There are a number of ways of structuring the discussion of the literature. Steane (2004) recommends a dialectical approach, in which different views and theoretical debates are compared and contrasted. This may work if your area is one where there are strongly divergent views, and you should always show awareness of different perspectives.

Another possible approach is to use the aims and objectives in your introduction, or a pilot study you have done as early research, to provide topics. Type of research may provide another option, for example academic versus practitioner.

As with any piece of writing, make sure that your structure is clear by explaining what you are going to do, and using appropriate headings.

Example

Redmond and Griffiths' review of food handling studies (2003) is an important summary statement of consumer food safety studies over the past four decades. The review analyses studies according to similarities and disparities of consumer knowledge, attitudes, intentions, self-reported practices and actual behaviour. It starts by looking at the studies within their historical context and also covers research methods, study size, country of origin, and year of completion.

The paper is clearly laid out with the structure as described above. Under each of the headings of consumer knowledge, attitudes, self-reported practice and behavioural intentions, findings are reported relating to such issues as hand washing, raw and cooked food, and temperature control. There are numerous tables which allow for comparisons, for example between Europe, North America and Australia and New Zealand, and the conclusions are given as a numbered list (p. 27) so are easy to follow.

It may be carping to suggest that the review would have been even clearer if the middle section, "Results and discussion", had a separate level of heading for the different aspects of the main categories of knowledge, attitudes etc.; as it is the overall structure is not always clear. However, the review still remains a model of its kind, and was cited over 100 times in its year of first publication.

Always make sure you relate your discussion to your own piece of research, and in particular to your own research question, which may well have come about through a gap you have identified in the research.

Writing a literature review

Always use an accepted bibliographical convention for in-text references to citations, for example the Harvard system where the work is only identified by the author's name and the date, with full references at the end, or the Vancouver system, where references are identified by numbers and listed in full at the end.

Check which system is preferred by your department or journal for which you are writing, and make sure you know how to use it consistently. There is a "How to guide" on the (used by Emerald) [Harvard referencing system](#).

Your writing style should be objective, balanced and dispassionate. The word "critical" may lead some to believe that they can be negative. Others, however, and particularly those from cultures which promote deference to the teacher, may feel intimidated by the thought of being critical.

Example

A fairly extreme example of a critical view of the literature is Jones and Noble's "Grounded theory and management research: a lack of integrity?" (2007). While this is not a review of the literature in the traditional sense, the authors do look in some detail at a number of studies that use grounded theory, criticizing them for the way in which they do not adhere to the fundamental tenets of the methodology. They also describe the evolution of Strauss and Corbin's own views of grounded theory and their subsequent disagreements. The style of writing, however, is measured and balanced.

In the following example, the authors comment that whilst attitudes are an important aspect of behaviour, attitudinal questions do not form a large part of the studies being reviewed. However, rather than making this criticism explicit, they state the facts (note in particular the last sentence).

Example

"It has been proposed that attitudes are affected by beliefs and values (47); for the purposes of this review, these psychological constructs are grouped together and referred to collectively as attitudes. Attitudinal questions were included in just over half (53%) of the food safety surveys reviewed. However, a large proportion of these surveys (44%) included only one or two questions relating to attitudes. Such questions usually concerned beliefs about causes of food poisoning, beliefs about favorable providers of information, perceptions of risky foods, beliefs about responsibility, and levels

of concern about various aspects of food safety. Very few survey studies actually involved detailed investigations of the role of cognitive elements that may influence important food safety behaviors and specific practices" (Redmond and Griffith, 2003).

Conclusion and references

Writing a good literature review demands a lot of work. First comes the slog through the databases and the trawl through articles. After initial impressions are formed, there is the process of selection: what is relevant? And how can I sum up and synthesize?

The most important task of any review which relates to original research, is always to consider not only, "how does it relate to my research?", but also, "how does it create space for my research?". It is only by familiarizing oneself with the literature that one can discover the important questions which remain to be asked, and hence one's own contribution to the field.

References

Georgakopoulos, G. and Thomson, I. (2008), "[Social reporting, engagements, controversies and conflict in an arena context](#)", *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, Vol. 21 No. 8, pp. 1116-1143.

Gomes, D., Carnegie, G. and Rodrigues, L. (2008), "[Accounting change in central government: The adoption of double entry bookkeeping at the Portuguese Royal Treasury \(1761\)](#)", *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, Vol. 21 No. 8, pp. 1144-1184.

Hemsley-Brown, J. and Oplatka, I. (2006), "[Universities in a competitive global marketplace: A systematic review of the literature on higher education marketing](#)", *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, Vol. 19 No. 4, pp. 316-338.

Hunt, S. and Derozier, C. (2004), "[The normative imperatives of business and marketing strategy: grounding strategy in resource-advantage theory](#)", *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, Vol. 19 No. 1, pp. 5-22.

Ingenbleek, P. (2007), "[Value-informed pricing in its organizational context: literature review, conceptual framework, and directions for future research](#)", *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, Vol. 16 No. 7, pp. 441-458.

Jones, R. and Noble, G. (2007), "[Grounded theory and management research: a lack of integrity?](#)", *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 2 No. 2, pp. 84-103.

Merrilees, B. and Miller, D. (2008), "[Principles of corporate rebranding](#)", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 42 No. 5/6, pp. 537-552.

Moustaghfir, K. (2008), "[The dynamics of knowledge assets and their link with firm performance](#)", *Measuring Business Excellence*, Vol. 12 No. 2, pp. 10-24.

Murray, R. (2002), *How to Write a Thesis*, Open University Press, Buckingham.

Oliver, P. (2004), *Writing your Thesis*, Sage, London.

Petrovic, J. (2008), "[Unlocking the role of a board director: a review of the literature](#)", *Management Decision*, Vol. 46 No. 9, pp. 1373-1392.

Redmond, E. and Griffith, C. (2003), "Consumer food handling in the home: a review of food safety studies", *Journal of Food Protection*, Vol. 66 No. 1, pp. 130-161.

San Martín, S. (2008), "[Relational and economic antecedents of organisational commitment](#)", *Personnel Review*, Vol. 37 No. 6, pp. 589-608.

Steane, P. (2004), "Fundamentals of a literature review", in Burton, S. and Steane, P. (Eds), *Surviving your Thesis*, Routledge, New York, NY, pp. 124-137.