

Top Tips on Writing a Literature Review for Your Education Research Project

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Tip 1: Plan & build: the 'swimming-pool' approach

One way to write your literature review is simply to write it consequentially from beginning to end. Another way is the 'swimming-pool' approach – you plan and build the whole text all at once, rather like a large pool filling with water. Polly does this here:

Polly is researching the use of tablet computers in mathematics in a secondary school. She starts her literature review by writing a series of titles: 'Development of technology in education', 'Current use of technology in secondary education', 'Use of tablet computers'; 'Use of tablet computers in mathematics' (note how her structure reflects the 'Funnel approach' described in 'A Beginner's Guide...', pp.93-94, starting with broad issues and moving through to the actual topic of her research).

As she takes notes from relevant literature, Polly adds ideas and quotes under relevant titles. As these notes build up, she finds she can add subtitles to each

section too – for instance, under ‘Development of technology in education’ she has mini-sections on ‘Hardware’; ‘Software’; ‘Uses in teaching’; ‘Uses for assessment’. Gradually she collects material on all sections of her literature review. She turns her notes into proper writing, creating one or two paragraphs for each idea discussed, and integrating direct quotes from the literature. When she has finalized her text, she can keep the titles and subtitles, or remove them, whichever she feels is best for clarity.

Tip 2: Taking notes from your reading

Some strategies to follow as you read and take notes:

- Note down **concise, specific details of research you read about** – numbers of those taking part, national context of the research, etc. Include these in your literature-review text. For example: ‘In interview research with 30 teachers in five schools in Scotland, Smith (2012) found that ...’. This kind of detail strengthens the depth and credibility of your writing.
- **Identify contrasts and similarities in ideas – where do writers agree, disagree, or have differing perspectives?** This process allows you to show ‘criticality’ – not just describing what people have written, but analyzing what one says against what others say to produce a composite picture of the issue under scrutiny.
- **Keep complete references for all the ideas, information and quotes you read and note down (direct quotes need a page number).** Doing this saves time and effort at the end when you check that your referencing is complete and accurate.

See also ‘A Beginner’s Guide...’ pp.89-92.

Tip 3: Taking notes from your reading – contd.

More strategies to follow as you read and take notes:

- Include relevant statistical data. For instance, if you are researching the training of teachers, can you find statistics about how many have qualified in recent years? If you are researching gendered achievement in reading, is there data available about how the attainment levels of girls

and boys compare? Statistical data of this kind strengthens the background picture you produce of the issue you are researching.

- Jot down your own thoughts: the strengths of the literature you are reading; gaps you notice in an author's thinking; the nature of 'discourse' (how people talk or write about an idea). These notes will help you to analyse and interpret ideas, both in the literature review itself and when you relate the findings of your research back to your literature review towards the end of your written project.

Tip 4: History of events, or history of ideas?

Cora is writing the literature review for her research on the education of children with special educational needs and disabilities in ordinary schools in England. She wants to include a section tracing how this aspect of education has developed in the last 50 years. There are many important reports and Government Acts which she could list. However, Cora's tutor advises her not simply to describe events, but to trace the changes in ideas and thinking which those events represent. Cora acts on this advice – here are some of the ideas she examines as a result:

- She finds that early literature focused on a medical view of disability, while later perspectives have emphasised the influence of social factors: environment, upbringing and education itself
- She finds that early literature concentrated on professional perspectives, while later literature has taken the views of parents and disabled students themselves more into account
- She finds that early thinking was about 'integration' – trying to make children ready to attend school. Later thinking has focused on 'inclusion' – changing education so that schools can accept and educate a wider range of children.

Tip 5: Use a range of literature

Your literature review is strengthened if you draw ideas from a variety of literature related to your topic. For instance:

- Books can provide a largely dependable source of perspectives on relevant themes

- **Articles in journals are more up-to-date** than books and can provide more analytical and critical outlooks on specific issues
- **Newspapers and television programmes do not provide reliable, academic material**, but they can provide evidence of 'popular' perspectives on your topic, allowing you to emphasise its current important and public attitudes
- Official reports give evidence of the guidance used by school and other educational settings to carry out their work. They may of course provide a rather 'rosy' picture of what goes on in education – always draw on more independent literature as well.
- Research reports can provide important detail of what other investigations have been carried out in your field, and what has been found out
- Internet material: **Check that what you find is thoughtful and generally well-balanced, with views based on reasonable evidence and argued in a rationale way – even if you do not agree with them.**

For information about how to find literature relevant to your topic, see 'A Beginner's Guide...', pp.83-89.

Tip 6: 'Criticality'

Three ways of strengthening 'criticality' in your literature review:

- **Compare research studies:** To what extent is the area of focus in the investigations similar or different? How do the methodologies used compare? What conclusions are reached? – how do these inform the issue being examined?
- **Compare perspectives:** How do authors' own views on a topic compare? Do different authors see things from different angles? Do they argue in similar or different ways?
- **Evaluate the literature:** To what extent is a text you examine reliable and comprehensive? Are ideas well argued? persuasive? unconvincing? overstated? Why is this so?

See 'A Beginner's Guide...', pp.96-98.

Tip 7: Citing literature in your text

Using different ways of referring to literature in your text strengthens the reader's interest in your writing. For example, you can write:

- Smith (2012) states (indicates/suggests/proposes/implies etc.) that...
- According to Smith (2012),...
- Similarly/On the other hand, Smith's (2012) perspective is that...
- Smith (2102) takes a similar/different view: that...
- Research by Smith (2012) found that...

On thing you should not vary, however, is the tense you use: present or past. So you might write: 'Smith (2012) states that...' or 'Smith (2012) stated that...', but keep the same approach throughout your review.

See also 'A Beginner's Guide...', p.180-181.

Tip 8: Where do research questions go?

Your literature review is closely related to the research questions you design for your project. But where should these research questions be placed – before or after the review? First check with your project tutor what your course requirements are in this respect, and follow this advice. However, if either is possible, you will need to decide what to do. For instance:

Before the review: Bianca's research project is about how beginner teachers address challenging behaviour in the classroom. In her introduction she writes about her own experiences and briefly traces recent developments in teacher training which relate to this issue. She finds that she can present her research questions from these initial ideas. Then after this, she can consider wider material on this topic in her literature review.

After the review: Zack's project is about how children represent the school environment in their drawings. He is not clear at the start of his project what his research questions should be. He finds therefore he needs to examine literature on this topic in detail first and share this scrutiny with his reader. This review then allows him to compose research questions focusing on particular aspects of this theme. This structure is reflected in the way he puts together his written project – his research questions follow his literature review.

Tip 9: Writing tips

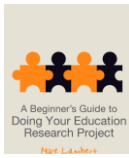
- **Vary your vocabulary:** Use the thesaurus on your computer to avoid repeating the same word several times in a small section of text. Note, for example, how different words are used in this sentence for the concept of 'examine': 'Smith (2012) examined students' attitudes, Jones (2010) scrutinised opinions of professionals, while parental views were surveyed by Brown (2011).'
- **Writing numbers:** There are differing opinions about how numbers should be written in a text. A common recommendation is that numbers under ten should be written as words; numbers ten and over should be written as numbers. A number at the start of a sentence is written as words. For example: 'The questionnaire was sent to 35 students – of these five did not reply. Thirteen teachers also agreed to complete it.' There is further guidance on the Internet about this issue.
- **Integrate short quotes:** In most cases direct quotes from the literature should be short and built into your text. For example: 'Smith's (2012: 32) concern was for students' "reflective thinking" and the way in which they "adapt their approaches to learning as a result".' Use long quotes only when more extended illustration of an idea is required.

For more guidance on academic writing, see 'A Beginner's Guide...', pp.184-189.

Tip 10: Link your review to your own investigation

In the final paragraph of your literature review, it can be useful to lead your reader on to your own project, as this is what usually comes next in your written text. For example:

Maria is investigating how teachers and teaching assistants work together to help children to learn. In the last paragraph of her literature review she summarises the ideas she has written about: 'This review has examined varied perspectives on two main themes: the roles teaching assistants play in the classroom, and the contributions they make to children's learning. It has highlighted a scarcity of research on how teachers and teaching assistants can work together to enhance children's learning.'



She then indicates how these ideas will be further pursued in her own investigation: 'This research project seeks to address this gap in the research, in particular by exploring how communication between teaching assistants and teachers before, during and after lessons can further the development of the children with whom they work'.

For full guidance on composing your literature review, see 'A Beginner's Guide...', Chapter 6.

Good luck with your project!

More 'Top Tips' ...

...on Choosing a Topic

https://www.academia.edu/4828193/Top_Tips_on_Choosing_a_Topic_for_Your_Education_Research_Project

...for Drawing Up Your Project Proposal

http://www.academia.edu/3500087/Top_Tips_for_Drawing_Up_Your_Education_Research_Project_Proposal

...for Writing Up Your Project

http://www.academia.edu/3357616/Top_Tips_for_Writing_Up_Your_Education_Research_Project

...to Improve Your Referencing

http://www.academia.edu/3642785/Top_Tips_to_Improve_Your_Referencing

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