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How do I develop a question for my literature review?

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Finding the right question for your literature review

All literature reviews should aim to answer a specific question. You can see from the literature review process outlined in Chapter 1 that identifying a literature review question is the first step in undertaking your literature review. This might be referred to as your **research question**.

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The overall aim of the question for your literature review is that, when answered, it should contribute to a better understanding of the practice area considered and ultimately improve patient/client care. However, you do not need to think that your question must be earth-shatteringly complex or sophisticated. Leave the big questions – such as what are the effects of a new drug or of the government's most recent policy on child poverty – to those with million-pound project grants and a team of highly trained researchers. Finding the right question does not necessarily mean a complex or big question. Normally the reverse is true. At undergraduate and postgraduate level, the best questions are very simple; generally they arise from your own practice and require an answer that you can feed back into practice. Finding the right question is one of the most important aspects of undertaking your literature review. We discuss this more throughout this chapter. In fact, the points made in this chapter are relevant to anyone undertaking any literature search for any purpose, even if the aim is not to write up a formal literature review.

Getting the question right

The question for your review does not have to be big but it does have to be well defined and focussed. It is very important that you develop a clear question, as without this your literature review will not be focussed. Defining a good, clear question is often difficult but it is crucial to spend time getting the question for your research right. The question provides the structure for the whole of the literature review process. A good question will act as a guide through the process of writing the literature review. It will provide a clear focus and indication as to what type of literature is required to address your question. If you get the research question right, you will find that you are directed to relevant literature that enables you to answer your question in the most appropriate way.

In contrast, if you get the question wrong – for example, if your question is vague, undefined or too broad – or indeed if you are not completely sure what question you are asking – you will find that you are unable to focus your study and are led in many different directions to an insurmountable quantity of information that is impossible to process until you finally discover that you have not actually addressed the question. A poor question will not act as a guide; if your question is vague, you will be uncertain which literature is most appropriate to use to answer the question. A question that is too broad is also unlikely to be answerable within the time frame for the writing of the review.

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Avoid complex questions

An example of a question that would be too difficult and complex to answer for a small-scale project is: *'What are the effects of domestic violence on family life?'* This is a huge and complex topic on which there is a lot of discussion and research evidence. Within the time span of a small-scale project, the researcher would be unable to cover the breadth of the topic and would be unlikely to be able to reach any conclusion based on the evidence reviewed. This is not to say that the researcher would be unable to comment on the issues surrounding domestic violence; however, it would be unlikely that such a big question could be addressed in a systematic manner. It would not be possible to review all the available literature and therefore the conclusions drawn would not reflect the full breadth of research and discussion. A more straightforward question might be: *'How do adolescents report the effects of domestic violence?'* This question takes the larger topic of domestic violence but focuses on just one aspect of it.

Prioritize getting your question right at the beginning

Given the importance of developing a good research question that is 'do-able' within your time frame, you are advised to get your research question established as soon as you can within the time scale for your review. If your other commitments then demand your time and your literature review is put 'on hold' for some weeks or even months – as is usual for those undertaking their final year of an undergraduate degree – you can return to your review later with a firm idea about what you are intending to do. Indeed, you might find that your approach to the review has developed during the time spent on other commitments. However, if your research question is not developed by the time you are temporarily drawn away to other commitments, you will not have the assurance that you have a project that is 'do-able' when you resume your review. This could therefore delay your study.

There are two main steps you need to take when choosing the question for your literature review, which are outlined and explored below.

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Step 1: Identify a research topic

Identifying your topic is necessary before you can finalize a question. For any topic, there are a good many questions that you could ask, but until you have identified your topic, you cannot identify a research/literature review question. There are a few important points to bear in mind when you are thinking about the topic you might want to explore.

Good topics and questions nearly always come from the practice environment

It is frequently the case in a practice setting that incidents arise that make you want to question your practice or the practice of others. An incident might occur that makes you keen to explore whether the optimum care/practice was carried out or whether an alternative outcome could have been achieved. It is also often the case in the busy practice environment that you do not have the time to explore incidents that arise because of other demands on your time. This is where academic study, in this case in the form of a literature review, can really complement your practice as you can use an incident that has arisen as the basis for developing your ideas for your review. This makes the literature review relevant to your professional life and a truly useful project. Your review will then be closely related to practice and you can feed your findings back to your clinical area and, indeed, when you are called to a job interview. Former students often report that they have used the expertise gained through undertaking a literature review throughout their career. It is useful to bear in mind that the ideas behind a lot of good literature reviews/research projects arise as a result of an incident that has occurred in practice that prompts the researcher to explore in more detail.

It is a good idea to 'brainstorm' a number of possible topics for your literature review. Once you have identified a possible topic, remember to keep a detailed account of the incident and include this in the introduction to your literature review, as this will set the context well for your study.

Example

A nursing student (Beed 2012) on placement in an intensive care unit recognized the challenging situation that arose when nurses were caring for patients who were potential organ donors; that is, where

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patients were unconscious and at the end of their lives but their organs could potentially be used to help others. The student was aware that this was an incredibly difficult and sensitive situation for those involved in looking after these patients and identified this as a topic for her dissertation. Beed (2012) developed this topic into a research question for her literature review in which she reviewed the available evidence about nurses' experiences of this situation. From her review of nurses' experiences, she was able to make some useful recommendations. These included the need for education about organ donation, brain death and bereavement support within pre and post registration education, the crucial role of the nurse in supporting the family and continuing that role after a transplant has taken place.

Example

A social work student on a master's programme (Childs 2012) was on placement in a charity working with people with multiple and complex needs. He experienced how homeless people with mental health and substance misuse needs often seemed to struggle to access appropriate support – specifically mental health services. He experienced how both the mental health and substance misuse services expected the other service to take the lead role in care provision. As a result, individuals often seemed to struggle to access the health care they needed. From this topic, Childs (2012) identified a research question that enabled him to review the literature in this area and to make some useful recommendations. These included that further research should be undertaken into the efficacy of a dual approach to mental health and substance misuse problems and that housing should be an integral part of any intervention looking at support for homeless adults with a dual diagnosis.

You must be interested and motivated in the topic

As you start thinking about your literature review, consider aspects of your professional practice that may warrant detailed attention. As discussed above, an event that occurred in practice, for example, might trigger your interest in exploring a topic. Questions that are abstract or devised from a textbook are less likely to keep your attention or be practically useful. It is critical that the research topic you select is a topic in which you have a genuine interest.

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Your literature review dissertation usually forms the most substantial component of your degree. It is a long process and will take you many months to complete. It is essential that you pick a topic in which you can maintain your level of interest. You will find that you become an expert on the topic in which your literature review is based. If you are undertaking your literature review as part of a degree, remember to prepare to discuss your topic when you attend for job interviews. It is a very good selling point for you, as it demonstrates that you have a real interest and expertise in a specific practice area. If you have selected a topic about which you are genuinely interested, you will find it easier to discuss it and might find that what becomes your extensive knowledge of this topic is helpful to you in your future career.

Once you have identified a topic, read widely

Once you have identified a possible area of interest, you are advised to read widely around the topics that interest you, in order to develop your thoughts and ideas as to which topic you would like to investigate. It is suggested that you undertake some initial literature searches in order to commence this process. Further discussion of how to search the literature is provided in Chapter 4. You will often get ideas from reading research and other papers that have already been published in the area in which you are interested. You may come across two or more studies on your topic where the results appear very different and this may prompt you to choose to review *all* the literature in this area to find out how these results fit into the literature as a whole. It is wise to ensure that the literature surrounding any potential topic is easily available. If initial searches identify literature that is located in journals that are not stocked by any library that you have access to, then your literature review will be more difficult, as you will be reliant on inter-library loans to access information. Alternatively, the literature surrounding your topic might be easily accessible but might be in journals that you do not normally access. This is not necessarily a disadvantage, however: if you select a topic that has, for example, a medical/pharmaceutical dimension, you may find that you have to negotiate and critique research methods that are unfamiliar to you.

Discuss your topic with anyone who will listen to you!

Discussing your ideas will help you clarify your own thinking in addition to getting feedback from others, for example: peers, friends, health and social care professionals, university tutors. This will help you to clarify

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and focus your ideas. If you have the opportunity to go to a conference or study day on an area that is closely related to your potential topic area, use this as an opportunity to discuss your ideas with others attending. If you come across research papers in your initial search for literature, email the authors and ask their advice as to which aspect of the topic they feel could be further explored through a literature review. If the topic that interests you derives from your professional practice, discuss this with those who work with you in order to get different perspectives on the topic. Discuss your area of interest with specialist health and social care practitioners working in related fields. Make contact with key people who are working in your area of interest. Explain that you are considering undertaking a project in a particular area and would like to discuss this. In most cases they will be more than happy to discuss their work with you. Even at this stage of the project, keep a diary of everything that you do: the databases you access, the libraries and keywords you use and any problems you encounter. You will need this when you come to write up the methods section of your work. You will also find the diary useful if you have to examine your own strengths and limitations and the overall limitations of the approach that you have taken.

Example of a diary

'I went to see the probation officer about support for young people when they are released from a young offenders' institution. I discussed my research ideas with him and we discussed the different agencies that are involved and what this impact may be. This has helped me to focus my question towards the role of buddies.'

Brainstorm your ideas using a mind map

You may consider using a mind map. Mind mapping is a process whereby you make notes about your ideas for a literature review question and use these to generate further ideas. In principle, mind mapping is an organized approach to developing ideas from initial ideas that you have. There are many websites available that discuss the concept of mind mapping in great detail that might be useful to access. The general principles are as follows. The main topic is written in the centre of a sheet of paper. You then identify topics that relate directly to the main topic and link these to the main topic. If there are other topics that link in but are less

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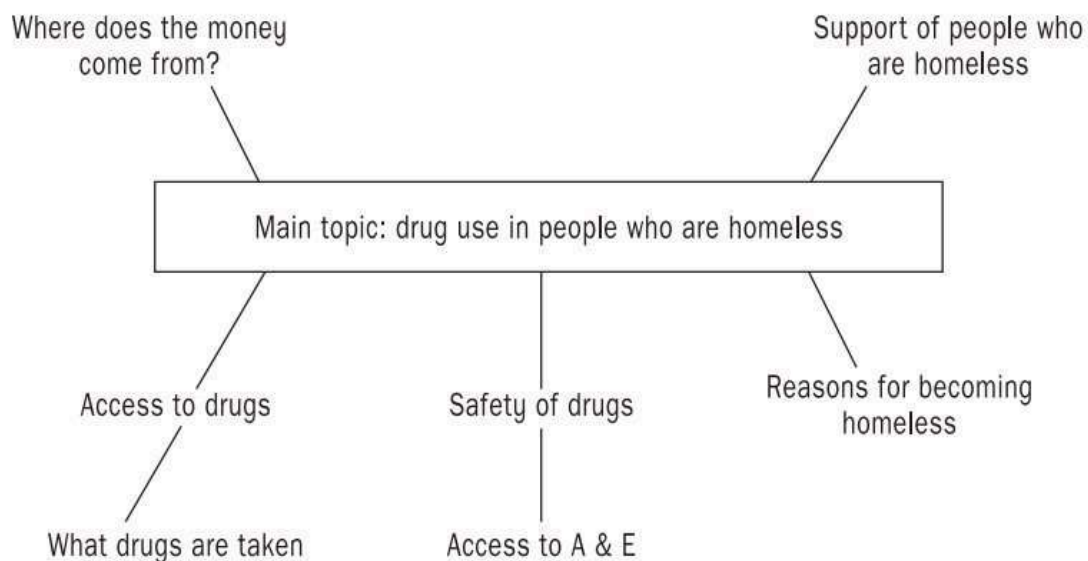
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Figure 2.1 Example of a mind map

associated with the main topic, you can add another layer in your map (see Figure 2.1).

If you develop a mind map for the topic in which you are interested, you will be able to see how various aspects of the topic relate to each other and how the area you are interested in relates to the topic area as a whole. This will assist you in developing the context for your review.

From these four strategies, you should be able to identify a potential research topic. The next stage is to refine this into a manageable and workable research question on which your literature review will be based.

Consider your course requirements

If you are undertaking your literature review as a dissertation as part of a professional qualification, you need to ensure that the topic is relevant to your professional field. Most professional courses state clearly that the dissertation topic should reflect the general learning outcomes of the programme, thus it is important to develop your area of interest so that it reflects the programme that you are studying.

Example

An adult nursing student might be interested in exploring the physiological processes involved in heart disease. As this topic has a strong physiological slant, the student would be advised to adapt this to reflect an adult nursing theme. An adaptation could be to explore the role of the nurse in delivering

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health promotion strategies that would protect against the development of heart disease. This topic has clear relevance to adult nursing, whereas the original topic has a more physiological foundation. In almost every case it will be possible to find an aspect of the chosen topic that reflects the aim of the professional course for which the dissertation is to be submitted, especially when considering the broad knowledge base upon which professional courses are based.

If you are undertaking your literature review as part of a degree, in principle you can build on a topic that has been explored in another area of your course but do check with the university in the first instance, in case you will be penalized for repetition. It is probably reasonable to recommend that no more than 10 per cent of another module/course of study should be repeated in your literature review.

Step 2: Identify a question you can answer in your literature review

Once you have identified your research topic, the next step is to focus on a question. There are a few important points to bear in mind when you are thinking about developing your research question.

There are many possible questions that can be developed from your topic

There is the potential to develop hundreds if not thousands of possible questions from any one topic. The question you identify needs to be appropriate for your level of study; that is why it is advisable to avoid large or complicated questions.

Let's say you are a social work student and you are interested in parents' experience of looking after a child with severe learning difficulties. There are many questions that might arise from this topic. Complex questions, which are beyond the scope of a novice researcher, include: *'Is there an increased incidence of mental health problems in the parents who look after a child with severe learning difficulties?'* This is a complex question because, not only do you need to define mental health problems and severe learning difficulties, you need to consider that these might be under-reported and how you are going to recognize whether there is an increased incidence or not. You would then need to

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explore all the research that has examined incidence of mental health problems (as you have defined them) with looking after a child with severe learning difficulties. In addition, you would need to assess the quality of those studies and determine whether they have been undertaken with sufficient rigour to be of use to you to answer your question.

An alternative question could be: *'What is the experience of parents of looking after a child with severe learning difficulties?'*, or *'Are parents able to access the help they need when looking after a child with severe learning difficulties?'* These questions are much more straightforward because, although you still need to define severe learning difficulties, you have simplified your question to an exploration of parents' experience (or their experience of finding help) rather than looking for correlations and associations between the parents' experience and the incidence of mental health problems.

Given that there are so many possible questions that can be developed from your topic of interest, the following tips will help you develop a research question that is right for you and your stage/level of study.

1. Keep your question simple and realistic to your time scale

It is probably realistic at undergraduate level, and even at postgraduate level, to have a question that is short and addresses just one question, or two at most. If you are any more ambitious than this, you are likely not to be able to answer any of the questions satisfactorily. Law (2004) has written a useful and detailed account of developing her research question, describing all the factors that contributed to the final question development. She discusses how her research question for her doctoral study was developed out of her postgraduate-level research and through discussion with those working in the area and extended reading. Clearly, for those undertaking smaller-scale projects, the question development will be a less protracted process; however, the point to be made is that the development of a question to be addressed by a literature review can be a lengthy process! Remember that your main aim is to pass your dissertation and to demonstrate that you have an understanding of the literature review process. Despite this, many literature reviews undertaken by undergraduate students *do* achieve useful insights into the research question and can lead to publication and enhance your career prospects.

2. Keep your question focussed but not too narrow

A good research question is clear and specific. The remit of the question should be small – but not too small. If the remit of the question is too big,

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you will be inundated with information and you will not be able to review all the information and therefore answer the question. Let's give two examples:

Example 1 – of a broad research question: *What causes cancer?*

The topic is clearly so big that it cannot be tackled by a novice researcher. Indeed, the above question is so vast that a team of researchers could explore this for a lifetime and still leave the question not fully answered! This means that it is unmanageable for a new researcher.

However, the remit of the review should not be so small that there is no identifiable literature to review! Consider the language you use to define the question. Questions beginning with 'how' and 'why' tend to lead to bigger research questions; however, if the topic area is limited, this need not make the question too broad. In general, students have a tendency to have too wide rather than too narrow a remit, so be prepared to refine the focus of your research question.

A more focussed question could be:

Example 1 – refined: *Are patients attending a GP practice aware of the importance of a healthy diet in the prevention of cancer?*

This question is more focussed and manageable. It is possible to search for evidence about patients' awareness of a healthy diet. In addressing this question, you would have to identify literature that explores patients' perception of healthy lifestyle choices.

Example 2 – of a broad research question: *What do patients think about their health or social care service?*

There are many aspects of the health or social care services in any country about which there might be research and other information, and the researcher is likely to be deluged with too much information that cannot be processed easily and systematically. Without a large research team and budget, the reviewer would be unlikely to be able to answer this question.

The following questions are more manageable:

Example 2 – refined: *What do patients think about restricted visiting times in hospital? or How do clients view the accessibility of their social worker?*

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These questions are more focussed and address an aspect of the bigger, unmanageable question. It is possible to search for evidence on patients' perception of visiting times or the accessibility of the social work team. This literature is not likely to be extensive and should yield a manageable amount of data to appraise and critique. Any literature regarding the views of relatives and/or staff can be discounted for this review, as the remit is fixed. The only area of interest is patients' or clients' views.

3. Keep the wording of the question clear and unambiguous

The terms referred to in the question should be clear and unambiguous. You will need to define the terms in your introductory chapter so that the reader is aware of the specific remit of your work. Defining your terms will also help you to clarify exactly what you are investigating. If, for example, you are looking at a topic about the care of the older person, you need to define how you are using the term 'older person'. You need to define the terms you use – this is sometimes referred to as 'operational definitions'. You then need to make sure that you keep to this remit. It can be tempting to use interesting related literature, which is outside this remit. If this happens, you can use the literature but make sure that you change the definition of the remit of your study at the outset.

Example

If you are looking at the role of male health and social care practitioners and you come across interesting ideas that relate to female practitioners, do not be tempted to include this, except in the discussion section, unless you alter the overall remit of your study. This is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

4. State your question as a question!

Once you have identified a question that is appropriate to your level of study and experience, think about the way your question is worded. In general, research questions can be presented as interrogative or declarative.

An interrogative question is stated as a question – for example, '*What factors affect the attrition rate of students from a university course?*', whereas a declarative question is written as a statement – for example, '*An investigation of the reasons behind attrition rates from a university course*'.

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It is recommended that you use the interrogative form when framing your research question. That is to ensure that you state a clearly defined research *question* rather than a statement. This will help to ensure that you keep your literature review focussed at all times and that all your writing is focussed on answering your question. It has already been mentioned that the research question provides the context for your entire literature review. It is therefore critical that you follow your chosen question in detail every step of the way. If your research question is phrased as a question, this will enable you to do that. It will be useful to discuss this process in depth with your supervisor.

5. Avoid leading questions

It is important to phrase your question in neutral language and to avoid phrasing your question in a leading way. As mentioned earlier, try not to make any assumptions about what you are trying to find out. Even if your research topic and question arise from a negative experience (for example, Childs 2012), and you document this in your introduction, you need to state your research question in a neutral way so that you make it clear that you are open-minded about what your answer will be. For example, in the question above about university attrition rates, we know that there is always an attrition rate from all courses so it is reasonable to look at this. However, you would need to look carefully at the literature on attrition rates and write this up in your introduction as a rationale for your study.

To take another example, say your area of interest is the attitudes of professionals to young girls who seek a termination of pregnancy. You have witnessed an incident in which, in your perception, a patient was not given a good reception by staff when she presented to a clinic for a termination of pregnancy. You felt that she was left alone for a long time, with minimal attention from staff and that those who did have contact with her appeared somewhat unfriendly. You think about exploring this further. You do an initial search of the literature and do not find a lot of evidence. You consider developing a research question phrased as follows: *'How can we improve professionals' attitudes to those who seek a termination?'*

The problem with this question is that you are assuming that the attitudes of professionals need improving, and yet you have not found any evidence to support this, except for your observation in practice. The assumption is made that what you witnessed in the accident and emergency department is common practice; however, this incident might have been an isolated event and might have been because the accident

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and emergency department was exceptionally busy at that particular time. Therefore, it is unwise to make an assumption that professionals' attitudes need to be improved within your question, unless there is a body of evidence to back this up. While the topic is a valid and important one, it is important to phrase your question in a neutral way which does not make assumptions about practice. The question could be phrased as follows: *'What are professionals' attitudes towards those who seek a termination of pregnancy?'*

6. Remain neutral as to the possible outcomes of your review

In addition to how you phrase the question, you need to remember to keep a neutral stance to your question in your own mind. If you select a topic about which you feel very strongly, for whatever reason, you need to remain objective about your literature review from beginning to end. You must resist the temptation to pre-empt the study by having pre-drawn conclusions as to what you will find. If you find yourself wanting to prove a point, then you probably have the wrong topic – you need to remain objective. You must engage in the literature review using a systematic approach and you may be surprised by the outcomes.

7. Make sure the question is answerable using the literature

This tip is specific to those doing a literature review and may seem obvious but it does need to be considered. You need to consider whether the research question is (easily) answerable from the literature. That is, the literature must contain the information that you require to answer the question.

Example

The following is a question that could be given to students taking an advanced-level history exam: *'What were the causes of the First World War?'* The typical student will diligently access the views and arguments of leading historians and present their analysis of the causes of the war but unless they can access the primary documents on which the debate rests, they will not be able to move the discussion forward and will be reliant on **secondary sources** to address their question. In other words, they are not able to address their actual research question. The student is likely to write an extended **essay** rather than a dissertation. However, if the question was presented as, *'What are the differing*

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views of two leading historians as to the causes of the First World War?', then the challenge becomes more realistic – this amended question can be answered using available and accessible literature, as the researcher has only to review the arguments presented by two leading historians. These arguments will be readily available. In principle, those undertaking a literature review should beware of literature review questions that refer to areas of literature that are inaccessible (for example, original documents that are not in the public domain), or so vast that a literature review is not manageable.

Consider the following questions:

Question 1: *What factors contribute to the use of evidence-based practice (EBP) by practitioners in social work?*

This question could be addressed by a researcher undertaking primary data collection. The question could be explored using an exploratory methodology using interviews and/or focus groups to explore these issues with the identified relevant practitioners or patients. However, it would be very different for the researcher who wanted to attempt to address these questions using literature review methodology. This is because of the availability and accessibility of the relevant material. The use of EBP is a broad topic and the researcher would have to access a very wide range of literature to identify relevant factors. Researchers would have to trawl through all the literature relating to evidence-based practice and social work in an attempt to identify factors that contribute to its implementation. This could be a very long process! Furthermore, because of this long process and the range of literature, it would be difficult to determine whether the literature had been searched comprehensively.

This question could be redefined so that it becomes manageable to the literature reviewer:

Question 1 – refined: *How do social workers refer to and implement EBP in their day-to-day activity?*

For this revised question, the search for relevant literature is more focussed. The reviewer should search for evidence of the *implementation* of EBP rather than any/all 'factors' that might contribute to the use of EBP.

Question 2: *What causes patients to self-harm?*

Similarly, the causes of self-harm are complex and this literature would

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also be difficult to access. There would be a lot of literature on this topic but it would be hard to find, as it is likely to be hidden within other literature and arise in many studies, but not necessarily as a main theme, and therefore is not easily identifiable.

Question 2 – refined: *What do patients who self-harm perceive to be the reasons for doing so?*

For this revised question, again the search for relevant literature is more focussed. The reviewer should search for literature concerning how patients perceive their reasons for self-harm.

8. Consider using PICOT (PICO) or SPIDER to guide the development of your research question

There are some acronyms (for example, **PICOT**, **SPIDER**) that might help you to guide the development of your research question. The letters in the acronyms refer to issues that you should consider when you develop your question. Many researchers use the acronym PICOT (as adapted by Fineout-Overholt and Johnston 2005) to guide the development of their question. The Cochrane Collaboration has adopted the use of the PICO formula (O'Connor *et al.* 2008). The prompts in the acronym are a guide to the components of a balanced and focussed research question and prompt the researcher to consider the following aspects when developing their question (please note that T is sometimes omitted from the acronym):

Population
Intervention or Issue
Comparison or Context
Outcome
Time.

Another approach is the SPIDER acronym, developed by Cooke *et al.* (2012). This new approach was designed specifically with qualitative research questions in mind and is as follows:

Sample
Phenomena of Interest
Design
Evaluation
Research.

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Considering these factors within your question will help you to develop a question that is balanced and focussed. However, it is necessary to point out that using the SPIDER or PICOT acronym will not help you to develop a question unless you have ideas and a good background/rationale for a question. Thus once you have ideas for your question, consider using the SPIDER or PICOT acronym to help you refine and focus your question further.

9. Undertake some initial searches

It is very important that, as a new literature reviewer, you can determine whether a discrete body of literature is accessible in order to address the literature review question. While it is theoretically possible to undertake a systematic search of the literature, find that there is very little on your topic and write this up successfully, this is likely to be a frustrating process. Equally, it is theoretically possible to undertake a superficial overview of a vast amount of literature, in which case your critical analysis would be minimal. However, neither of these options is ideal, especially at undergraduate level, where you are likely to be assessed on the *process* you undertook. It is important to demonstrate that you carried out a systematic and comprehensive process in your review. If you have an unmanageable amount of literature, it is unlikely that you will be able to demonstrate a thorough **critical appraisal** or analysis of your literature.

For these reasons, it is better to do an initial literature search to assess the scope and variety of literature that has been written on your topic, with special regard to the amount of primary empirical data there are. This will ensure that you are likely to have enough literature to answer your question and will avoid the review becoming an extended essay. If, after carrying out an initial search, there appears to be very little literature on your topic, or if there is extensive literature, you are advised to refine your research question. As a general rule, for a small-scale project at undergraduate level, an ideal range of literature would be 6–15 *research* articles that focus on your topic. Those studying at postgraduate level will be able to utilize more literature. At this initial stage of the project it can be difficult to assess the amount of literature as you will not have undertaken comprehensive searches, but it is important to bear in mind that you do not want to be overwhelmed with literature.

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EXPLAINING THE TERMS USED IN YOUR RESEARCH QUESTION 35

10. Remind yourself (often) of your question

Once you have identified your research question, you might find it useful to write it down and stick it to your computer screen, fridge or any surface where you will regularly see it. This will ensure that you do not forget your question and that you are constantly reminded of the focus of the research question. The process of developing a research question can be a lengthy one and will be shaped by what you read and your discussions with others.

Explaining the terms used in your research question and use of theory and/or a theoretical framework

Once you have established your research question, it is important to make sure that you define what you mean by the different terms or concepts you use so that there is no possibility for confusion when others read your work. Many terms can have different meanings in different contexts and it is important that you make it clear right from the beginning the exact meaning you are referring to in your work. This ensures that both you and your readers are completely clear about what your study is about. Therefore, in your introduction, you need to explore each concept that you include in your research question. You also need to define the broader concepts within which your research question fits.

Example

If you are exploring how professionals adhere to the principles of confidentiality, you will naturally define what is meant by confidentiality and the legal and ethical implications in your introduction to your review. This introductory discussion provides background information and sets the context for your review. You are not challenging this information; you are accepting it as fact for the purposes of your literature review and using it as a basis for further study. You are therefore advised to use information that is uncontroversial in this respect.

It is essential to include this information as background literature, which sets your review in context with political initiatives and legal rulings, and so on. It allows you to demonstrate that you are aware of the

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academic literature that is relevant to your study, and which helps to give your study focus and pertinence. You will, for example, be marked down if there are recent developments in your area that you do not acknowledge. Your introductory discussion also enables you to define the key terms you use in your review so that your reader is clear about what you are referring to in your review and there is no ambiguity. When you then finish your review, you are likely to refer back to this initial literature and relate your findings to them. This provides structure for your review and ensures that your literature review is set within a relevant academic context.

You may consider, or be asked to consider, using a **theoretical framework** to provide a structure for your literature review. The use of a theoretical framework refers to the application of a particular theory that is relevant to the research question and to which the eventual literature review is referred. This is more focussed than applying introductory background information to your study as discussed above. Paterson *et al.* (2001) describe the use of a theoretical framework to guide the development of the research question. They argue that it assists the reviewer to define relevant concepts in the literature review research question and to identify the scope of the review.

Sometimes a theoretical framework will arise naturally in relation to the research question or even be implicit within the research question.

Example

If you were exploring the way in which informed consent is managed in patients undergoing minor surgery, the theory of informed consent would be central to your study and would form a framework around which your study could be based. The results of your literature review would be reviewed in the context of informed consent theory (Faden and Beauchamp 1986) at the end of the study. Alternatively, if you were exploring motivation for smoking cessation, you might refer to the stages of change theory (Prochaska *et al.* 1994) and apply the results of your literature to this theory in the discussion.

The incorporation of a theoretical framework into a literature review can be complex. There might not be an apparent theory upon which to frame the study and in this case it is entirely reasonable to proceed without a framework. In addition, you might find that adhering strictly to a theoretical framework restricts your review and you are less open