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The Literature Review

Focus on your research objectives • Referencing • Description vs critical evaluation • Learning theory and your dissertation • Structuring your Literature Review

Focus on your research objectives

What advice can one give about writing a Literature Review? It would certainly help if you understood the point of a Literature Review. You carry out a review of literature to find out who is saying what about the things you are interested in, specifically your research objectives, and to show your tutor that you have read widely, and in depth, and that you have the necessary skills to both interpret and evaluate such literature, or as Haywood and Wragg (1982: 2) put it: a review of literature should demonstrate that 'the writer has studied existing work in the field with insight'.

Once again, let us revisit the sample research objectives listed in Appendix A, but this time with an eye on the Literature Review:

Specifically, within the context of higher education, the objectives of this research are to:

- 1 *Identify* the forces driving e-Learning and the barriers to the successful delivery of e-Learning programmes.
- 2 *Evaluate critically* models and frameworks relevant to supporting academic staff in coping with e-Learning.
- 3 *Explore* staff stakeholder views and practices related to e-Learning preparation, including drivers and barriers to e-Learning.
- 4 *Formulate* recommendations on staff preparation issues.

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In terms of the Literature Review, for the first objective above we would find out who is saying what about the 'forces driving e-Learning and the barriers to the successful delivery of e-Learning programmes'. Similarly, we would look at relevant literature to evaluate e-Learning frameworks (objective 2), thus placing ourselves in a good position at the end of our dissertation to argue that objective 2 above was also achieved. Objective 3 could be implemented through a case study and objective 4 is derived as a result of our findings from objectives 1, 2 and 3.

When writing the Literature Review, it is very easy for students to drift from their main research objectives to find themselves immersed in writing about peripheral aspects of their topic that are extraneous to their research. A simple but clever way to avoid this pitfall is to create sub-sections/headings in your Literature Review chapter that link directly to your specific research objectives. This makes it difficult to stray from what you are supposed to be writing about. For example, for the research objectives above to be covered in the Literature Review (i.e. objectives 1 and 2), you could create the chapter subheadings shown in Figure 5.1. In this way, you are forcing yourself to concentrate on looking at literature germane to your stated objectives and thus minimizing the danger of sleepwalking into wasteful and unrelated discussion.

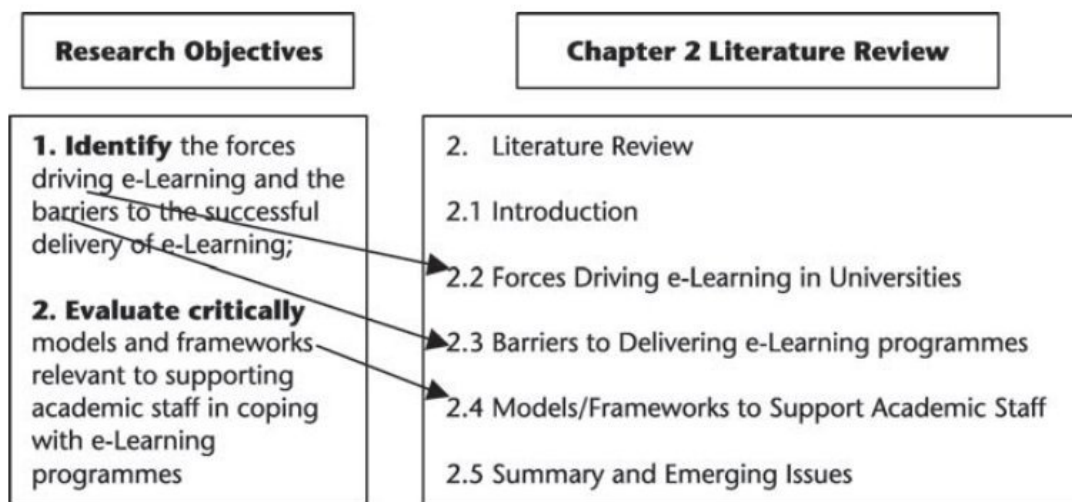


Figure 5.1 Mapping research objectives to chapter sub-sections

But what of the *content* of a Literature Review? What passes for a good Literature Review? A *good* Literature Review is characterized by the following features:

- It lays out what research has been done by others *relevant to your research aim/objectives* (why waste your time discussing irrelevant stuff?).
- It presents the work of others in a *clear, interesting* and *progressive manner* (to build up a coherent/logical picture).
- It provides evidence of *in-depth critical evaluation* (i.e. to show that YOU can give an opinion and support it with argument/evidence).

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- It highlights *pertinent/emerging issues* (otherwise what is the point of your Literature Review?).
- It *cites a variety of relevant sources properly* (to show that you are well read and scholarly in your approach).

Below are examiner comments, complimenting aspects of various student Literature Reviews, comments that you want to see written on your marked dissertation:

- '*Highly focused Literature Review . . .*'
- '*Clear evidence of critical evaluation . . .*'
- '*Logical structure . . . eliciting main issues . . .*'
- '*Well done! An excellent in-depth review of relevant literature, supported by properly cited sources . . .*'

Conversely, a *bad* Literature Review exhibits too many of the following (bad) practices:

- Irrelevant rambling (i.e. what we call '*student drift*').
- Ideas presented in no particular order (and so difficult to follow thread of student discussion).
- Too descriptive (with no/little attempt to give an opinion, much less support it with reasoned argument).
- Ends abruptly, devoid of any clarification of main findings.
- Limited sources used (mainly websites), coupled with inconsistent referencing styles.

The following are other excerpts from actual examiner comments, highlighting deficiencies in student Literature Reviews (comments you hope do not appear in your marked work!):

- 'Poor standard of referencing.'
- 'Too descriptive in nature.'
- 'No evidence of critical evaluation.'
- 'Lacks focus.'
- 'Limited use of sources.'
- 'Superficial discussions.'

From the examiner's perspective, she is looking at your review of literature to see if it is relevant to your research focus, that it illustrates a spread and depth to your reading, and that it shows evidence of *critical evaluation*. Make sure that you refer to a wide variety of sources, such as respected journals, books, conference proceedings, reports, credible websites, etc. to demonstrate to your examiner(s) that you are well read in your dissertation topic and that you have a sound grasp of the theory associated with your research area.

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Too many students focus on uncritical website sources, displaying a lack of breadth of material relevant to their study, resulting in a one-dimensional perspective.

Common problems that students encounter when they first start to write their Literature Review are that they are not sure: (1) where to find literature; (2) how to reference the literature properly; (3) how to review the literature; and (4) how to structure their Literature Review chapter. The first problem – where to find the literature – is easy to address, because the answer is: 'Go and look for it!' There is no royal road to learning, and the material will not just appear in front of you as if by magic: you have to go and look for it. By all means type keywords into your Internet browser (use Google Scholar) but also visit the university library, look at past dissertations, read relevant journals, get hold of recently published conference proceedings related to your topic, and follow up the references supplied in your lecture and seminar hand-outs. The material you need will not appear all at once, rather you will discover that one source will lead to another, one author directing you to another, one article referring to another article that may be of use to you, and so on. Collecting literature sources is an accumulative process that requires patience and perseverance in equal measure.

Seeking out and unearthing literature sources is also an investigative skill. One could compare such a task as akin to the work of a detective: you start with certain questions which you need answers to (i.e. your research objectives), search for clues to find answers to those questions/issues (in this case, the clues are to be found, initially anyway, in literature sources), you discard that which is irrelevant to your work (i.e. unrelated to your research objectives), follow up leads to other sources (i.e. references made by other authors to work that they have read), construct a case based on evidence (i.e. address your specific research objectives based, in the first instance, on your literature findings) and finally lay down the facts as you see them (i.e. present the results of your Literature Review, highlighting your main findings and the implications of your work).

In terms of your structure, it is good practice at the start of your Literature Review to remind the reader (i.e. your tutor/marker) of your research objectives and the areas that you intend covering in your Literature Review. By doing this you will be helping yourself to achieve focus, which is so important in a Literature Review. It is not uncommon for students, halfway through their Literature Review, to forget about their initial objectives and to wander into other areas which, although interesting, are irrelevant to their work (and are taking up valuable space in their dissertation).

Appendix C contains a fitting example of an introductory section to a Literature Review (for a postgraduate dissertation). It re-lists the research objectives and indicates which objectives will be tackled within the Literature Review, as well as reiterating the value of the Literature Review topics, and so places the relative importance of the Literature Review within the context of the dissertation.