3
Conducting a literature review

Wilson, J. (2014) Essentials of Business Research: A Guide to doing your research project. Sage.

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- understand the nature of a literature review;
- be able to explain the importance of conducting a literature review;
- know the stages in the literature review process;
- plan a literature search and know various sources of literature;
- explain the typical structure of a literature review;
- know how to present a literature review; and
- understand the difference between a good and a poor literature review.

Introduction

This chapter is about how to conduct a literature review. When undertaking your research project it is essential that you are aware of and acknowledge existing research in your chosen area. Most student researchers therefore spend a considerable amount of time reviewing the literature: first, in order to identify possible gaps or ideas that can help refine their own research and, second, to examine relevant sources so as to become fully conversant with the literature.

This chapter starts by introducing the nature of a literature review and briefly stresses why it is an essential part to your research project. The next section aims to answer a common question among student researchers, namely, 'Why conduct a literature review?' This is then followed by a discussion on the literature review process, in particular the stages that you are likely to go through when searching the literature and conducting your review. Next, planning your literature search emphasizes the necessity of planning your review, while the section on sources of literature provides a relatively brief overview of the main places to look in order to determine what has been written on your chosen topic. These sources include books, journals,

Internet sites and abstracts. A key part of conducting a review is recognizing where to search. Therefore, this section sets out not only the process of searching the literature, but also the range of sources that can be accessed.

The ability to carry out a critical review of the literature remains a challenge for many students. The intention of the following section is to alleviate these concerns by discussing how to adopt a critical approach. Another common cause of concern for students is structuring and presenting the literature review. Therefore, an illustration of how to divide up the review section is provided, along with an example of an introduction. Next, our attention turns to what constitutes a good or a poor literature review. Although by no means exhaustive, I have included examples of good practice, along with the most frequent problems students encounter. Finally, the last part of the chapter serves as a reminder of the importance attached to a critical review of the literature. In short, how to write a good literature review is something that many students find particularly challenging. This chapter should help you to deal with this challenge as it explains the common issues that students typically face when undertaking this part of their research.

Nature of a Literature Review

In the context of your research, 'literature' means all sources of published material. A *literature review* can be described as 'identifying, evaluating and critically assessing' what has been published on your chosen topic. Reviewing the literature critically will allow you to develop an understanding of previous research that is relevant to your own study. In addition, it should allow you to understand how the literature has developed. An important part of conducting your literature review is to establish the current state of findings in your chosen area. For example, an environmental scientist studying climate change is unlikely to conduct research without first referring to previous studies into climate change. Similarly, as a student researcher you also need to be aware of existing research. Once you have chosen your topic, e.g. mergers and acquisitions involving UK companies, you then need to find out what has been written about it across a wide variety of media. This is likely to include books, textbooks, academic journals, government reports, trade magazines, Internet websites, newspaper articles and quite possibly unpublished dissertations.

Conducting a methodical review is not an easy task. To be sure, it is not something that you can do over the course of a weekend! In truth, your review is likely to take several months. The length of time that you spend on your review is usually dependent on three factors: (1) the amount of literature available; (2) the accuracy of data; and (3) access to data.

Jeffrey W. Knopf (2006: 127) suggested that a literature review has two key elements. First,

> it should concisely summarize the findings or claims that have emerged from prior research efforts on a subject. Second, a literature review should reach a conclusion about how accurate and complete that knowledge is; it should

present your considered judgements about what's right, what's wrong, what's inconclusive, and what's missing in the existing literature.

Why do I have to conduct a literature review?

Students have asked me on many occasions, 'Why do I have to conduct a literature review?' Understandably, for some students the process of conducting a literature review is totally alien to them. Often, these are international students who originate from countries with markedly different educational systems from that of the UK. However, in some instances UK students may also experience difficulty conducting the review. In short, conducting a thorough, critical literature review is no easy task for the novice researcher. Yet it forms an integral part of your research. Through compiling a literature review you are demonstrating an important set of skills.

> Undergraduates researching for their dissertation or thesis are expected to show familiarity with their topic. Usually, this takes the form of a summary of the literature, which not only demonstrates the skills to search and compile accurate and consistent bibliographies, but also summarizes your key ideas, showing a critical awareness. They are required to demonstrate, on the one hand, library and information skills, and on the other, the intellectual capability to justify decisions on the choice of relevant ideas and the ability to assess the value of those ideas in context. (Hart, 1998: 9)

Several reasons support the carrying out of a literature review. First, you should review the literature on your chosen topic because it can provide much-needed inspiration for research topic ideas. Second, although you may already have a significant level of knowledge on a particular topic, a review of the literature is likely to further this knowledge. Third, it can help to identify new and emerging research areas. Fourth, it can ensure that you are actually contributing to an area of research by avoiding what has been done already. Fifth, previous researchers often make explicit recommendations for further research. Sixth, by reviewing previous literature you are able to identify methods and approaches used by others in similar research areas, as well as identify gaps in knowledge. Finally, the review is a way of organizing your own thoughts. It is also a record of the evidence/material you have gathered.

Conducting a literature review can have several benefits:

- It can give you a general overview of a body of research with which you are not familiar.
- It can reveal what has already been done well, so that you do not waste time 'reinventing the wheel'.
- It can give you new ideas that you can use in your own research.
- It can help you to determine where there are problems or flaws in existing research.
- It can enable you to place your research in a larger context, so that you can show what new conclusions might result from your research.

(Knopf, 2006: 127)

Literature Review Process

The best way to think of the literature review is as a *process*. Each subsequent step builds on the previous one, building a solid understanding of the literature.

I am aware that you may decide not to follow each step to the letter. For example, it is likely that you may already have what you perceive as relevant literature. Therefore, you do not need to go out and actively search for your sources. Still, wherever possible, try to follow the process as closely as you can in order to ensure that you adopt a thorough, efficient approach to your literature review. The literature review process involves the following:

Research questions and objectives

By now you should be familiar with how to formulate research questions and objectives, as this is something that was covered in Chapter 2. Once you are confident that you have a suitable range of objectives and research questions, you are then ready to proceed to the next step of defining your parameters. At this stage, it is worth noting that your research questions and objectives will ultimately determine the literature that you will read and refer to in your literature review. For example, if one of your objectives is 'To determine the marketing metrics used by UK national newspapers', then one would expect to see reference to articles on different types of marketing metrics, as well as the UK newspaper industry. In simple terms, the marker of your project will be looking to see if there is a clear 'link' between your research questions and literature review.

Define parameters

Essentially, the term 'parameters' means you are setting *boundaries* to your study that help you to narrow down what it is that you intend to search. One way of doing this is establishing *key words* (see below). The ability to be clear about what it is that you are trying to study can help set your parameters. In some cases, parameters linked to a given topic are reasonably clear, particularly in relation to certain theories. On the other hand, you may find it difficult to set parameters. This is where reviewing existing articles can help, especially to determine parameters to similar studies and how these relate to your own work.

Key words

Both Internet search engines and search engines specific to applicable databases rely on *key words* to find relevant information. It is therefore essential that you are able to identify your topic, sub-topics, main variables, theories, key concepts, etc., in the form of key words. You will then be able to search for works by both single and combined key word searches (O'Leary, 2004: 70). An example of how to do a key

word search is illustrated later in the chapter. For now, it is worth considering possible key words for your study. Ideally, you do not want to be in a position where you are unclear or have too many or too few key words, as this is likely to make your literature search all the more difficult.

Conduct search

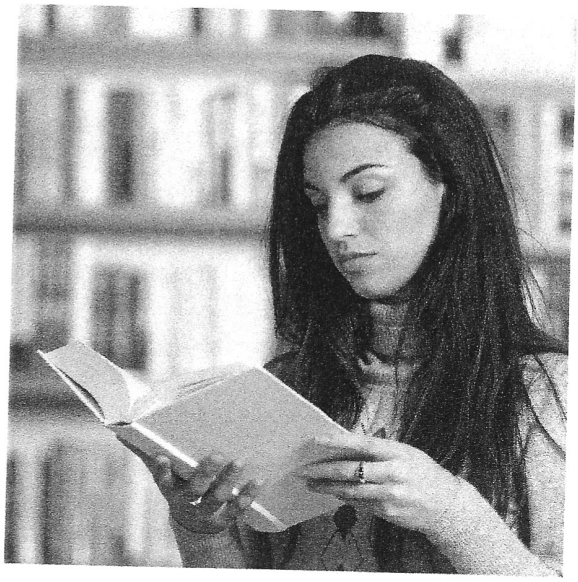
A key part to conducting your search is identifying possible sources of literature. The majority of your search will involve reading through articles in academic journals. After all, your project is of an academic nature. The main thing to do at the beginning of your search is to identify the leading journals in your discipline. It is usually in leading and/or specific journals relating to your chosen topic that you will find the greatest wealth of information.

Jill Hussey and Roger Hussey (1997: 87) provide the following useful guide to conducting a literature search:

- It is very important to start exploring the literature as soon as possible. If, initially, your research project is still fairly unfocused, your search will be in general terms only.
- Decide the scope of your research and set your parameters accordingly (e.g. by period of time, geography or industry).
- Determine the key words, including alternative spellings, synonyms and differences in usage.
- Only collect articles, books, papers, etc. which are relevant to your research (e.g. in terms of subject matter, methodology, research instrument, theoretical discussion). Good research articles should review the literature, describe the research methodology used in the study, discuss the results and draw conclusions.
- Use the references given in the literature you have collected to guide you to other articles you should collect.
- When you start to recognize the references cited in other works, you are nearing the end of your first search.
- In order to keep up to date with the literature, it is important that you continue your literature search throughout your study.

Today, student researchers are in the fortunate position of having access to a wide range of electronic sources, in particular electronic databases that contain articles from academic journals. As a student, your library card is likely to offer you free access to a large number of articles relevant to your research project. Perhaps one of the more well-known electronic databases in the field of business and management is 'Emerald'. It is something that is certainly popular with my own students, largely because it is easy to access and holds full articles on many different business-related topics.

Basically, Emerald is an online database covering 24,000+ articles and 104+ journal titles. It covers mainly management and business subjects, e.g. marketing, human resources, finance, general management and strategy. Although there is no substitute for actually using Emerald, Table 3.1 gives you an insight into how to perform a *key word search*. The first column shows the words entered into the 'quick



search' facility, while the right-hand column shows the actual number of 'hits' or, i other words, articles that contain the terms entered.

In Table 3.1, you can see that through experimenting with key words, the stu dent has managed to refine their search to a manageable number of sources. Obvi ously, simply searching for just 'trust' or 'commitment' is far too general, and likel to encompass a wide range of articles. Table 3.2 shows the same search terms however, this time an 'Advanced search' has been selected, followed by 'Conten item title' in the 'All fields' box.

Clearly, searching the literature takes time. However, undertaking searche using the key words or themes set out in your research questions will ultimately help you to identify the most relevant and leading studies in your selected area o research.

TABLE 3.1 How important is trust and commitment in business-to-business relationships?

Search item	Hits
'Commitment'	43,607
'Trust'	35,169
'Business-to-business'	671
'Trust and commitment'	657
'Business-to-business relationships'	5
'Trust and business relationships'	3

TABLE 3.2 How important is trust and commitment in business-to-business relationships? (2)

Search item (Advanced search)	Hits
'Commitment'	593
'Trust'	796
'Business-to-business'	1
'Trust and commitment'	12
'Business-to-business relationships'	0
'Trust and business relationships'	0

What if I can't find any relevant sources?

'I can't find any literature on my research topic' tends to be an issue for those students who have not gone about their literature review in an appropriate, systematic way. Often, literature is always available. In general, if you experience problems finding literature on your chosen topic, it is probably due to the following causes:

- **you are looking for the wrong type of source;**
- **you are looking in the wrong place;**
- **you have problems with the parameters or key words for your research; or**
- **you really have found an uncharted research area.**

How do I plan my literature search?

When it comes to the best way to plan the literature search, there is no one definitive answer. Fundamentally, two key factors need to be considered – *organization* and *time*. In terms of the former, I have already stressed the importance of keeping an accurate record of your findings. It is also a good idea to plan when and where you intend to conduct your literature search. In terms of the latter, make sure that you allocate sufficient time to searching the literature. Personally, I find that it is the kind of task that very rarely can be undertaken in short time periods. Preferably, you should allocate a minimum of half a day to conduct an efficient review of key sources.

Obtain literature

Obviously, in order to do a literature review you need to obtain literature. Try to use a wide range of sources. Some students have a tendency to mainly use web-based sources when conducting their literature review. By only referring to a very narrow range of online literature, key studies in your chosen area are likely to be ignored. You will find that the majority of literature is accessible in your college or university library. By now, you should be familiar with the sources made available by your

institution's library. These will almost certainly include textbooks, journals, reports, magazines, encyclopaedias and directories, to name but a few. Of course, in some cases these sources may only be available in hard copy or electronic format. Still, this should not detract from your ability to obtain the literature.

For part-time or mature students, a useful source of literature is often their employer. I have known several cases where students are actively encouraged by their employer to make use of all available literature within their place of work. Yet this support is usually because the employer has sponsored the student to base their research on the company.

Evaluate

Two key reasons exist why researchers use a wide range of sources when reviewing the literature. First, different sources are open to varying degrees of bias. For example, if you cite an article written in the UK's *Guardian* newspaper on government education policy, you will most probably get a largely critical viewpoint. In other words, being a left-wing newspaper, the journalist is more likely to write something that takes on a left-wing political bias. Obviously, as a researcher, you need to be aware of bias, as this will affect your own evaluation and interpretation of the findings. Second, different sources are aimed at different audiences. As a result, they go through a variety of processes prior to publication.

Recording the literature

At the beginning of your project, as soon as you are able to, get into the habit of *organizing* your literature. Ultimately, by the end of your project you will have gathered a wide range of sources. Each one that you refer to needs to be included in the bibliography section at the end of your project. Believe me, a situation where you are frantically searching for your sources at the last minute is best avoided! Therefore, it is a good idea to make a note of each source from the outset. Ideally, enter the full reference (Harvard system) and comments in Word. This is for the simple reason that you can do a 'cut and paste' when it comes to finalizing your references. In addition, organizing articles electronically is far less cumbersome than storing hard copies. Hussey and Hussey (1997: 102) recommended the following reasons for maintaining a database:

- **You need to be able to identify the full and accurate reference in order to find or order the material.**
- **You can develop links among authors, topics, results and periods of time by re-sorting your database.**
- **It prevents duplication of effort.**
- **You will need to refer to your sources of information in your proposal and final research report.**
- **Others reading your finished work will be able to trace the original sources of information easily.**

By the time you start your research project, you should have some experience of *referencing*. Basically, referencing your work involves two things. First, if you are citing a piece of work in the main text of your research, then you need to acknowledge within the text the source from which you have gathered the information. If you are using the *Harvard referencing system*, this involves citing within the main text (as opposed to footnotes). Some institutions may insist on an alternative referencing system that requires students to cite work within footnotes. Always check with the project guidelines published by your college or university to find out which referencing system you are required to follow.

Another aspect of referencing that tends to vary between institutions is use of the term 'references' and 'bibliography'. In general, *references* is a comprehensive list of sources that have been cited in the main text of a research project, whereas *bibliography* refers to those items that a student has read but not necessarily cited in the text. There appears to be no consensus between institutions as to the preferred method. For example, you may find that all references, both those consulted and cited, are required to be listed underneath the one heading of 'bibliography'. On the other hand, your project guidelines may require you to distinguish between bibliography and references. In short, it is best to consult your project guide or ask your project supervisor to determine what is required.

Using research management software to organize your literature search

There a number of *research management programs* available. These are designed to make it easier to organize and store literature in a searchable library. One that I have personally used and is ideal for students doing a research project is ReadCube which is a free academic software and reference manager for researchers. This can be downloaded at www.readcube.com. Alternatively, you could simply organize your journal articles on a thematic basis by creating a folder for each theme. For instance, if we use the earlier marketing metrics and UK national newspaper example, in the broadest terms, you could have one folder for 'Marketing metrics' and another folder for 'UK newspaper industry'. It is important to take an organized approach from the outset, otherwise you will find it difficult when it comes to locating literature and writing your review.

Start drafting review

If you are fully conversant with the literature and you have organized it into something that is manageable and easily accessible, then you are ready to begin drafting your literature review. Notice that I use the word 'draft'. This is because in all likelihood you will end up writing your literature review several times. Not only because you discover new literature that you wish to incorporate, but also

because your supervisor may require you to rewrite it. On the other hand, you may simply wish to rewrite it several times until you hit upon a final version that you are comfortable with. Still, the main reason that you will write several drafts is because you should continue conducting your literature search up to a few weeks prior to submission.

Sources of Literature

Incorporating an eclectic mix of sources into your research project is likely to be deemed good practice by your supervisor and/or your marker. It illustrates that you have gone to great lengths when conducting your literature review.

Different sources of literature have different advantages and disadvantages. The important thing is that you are fully aware of these strengths and weaknesses, and that you refer to each one when conducting your review. This section examines the main sources that you are likely to draw on when reviewing the literature.

General reports

These may include *government reports, country data reports* such as those produced by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), and market research reports such as those produced by Mintel. In some cases, these reports are difficult to access and can only be accessed by paying a subscription fee, although the majority of university and college libraries subscribe to the leading reports. Their usefulness should not be ignored, particularly if you are conducting research into a topic that may make use of macroeconomic data. You may find that market research reports produced, and commissioned, by different companies may contain conflicting data. This can make an interesting inclusion to your research.

Theses

These include major projects such as those associated with MPhil and PhD degrees. You may be able to access these in your own institution. Alternatively, the British Library keeps a large number of *theses*. The advantage of referring to research of this nature is that it may provide you with ideas for your own study. Generally, the structure is likely to be very similar to your own research project. For example, you will certainly see reference to some kind of introduction, methodology, data analysis, etc. But be wary of the fact that a thesis submitted for the award of an MPhil or PhD is usually in the region of 60,000–80,000 words. It will certainly be more in-depth and probably more theoretical than your own submission. Also, a PhD thesis needs to 'make a contribution to knowledge'. This is not the case for undergraduate studies.

Conference reports

The majority of *conferences* have a theme that is quite specific. For example, the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) conference examines topics relating to interactions, relationships and networks in business-to-business markets, while the annual Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) conference explores all areas of accounting and finance. An *academic conference* usually invites academics to write and present a paper based on a particular theme associated with the conference. In essence, it is largely an opportunity for academics to get together to discuss each other's research interests. How does this apply to student researchers? Well, in many cases, the entire body of papers presented at the conference are put on to the conference organizer's website. Some of these are available for public access free of charge. The IMP is such an example. More than 1,600 articles can be viewed free of charge at www.impgroup.org.

Newspapers

When considering *newspapers* as a possible source, make sure to review what is commonly referred to as the *business press*. For instance, the *Financial Times* is a great source for leading articles on company performance, mergers and acquisitions, the financial markets, and information on sectors ranging from construction to IT. Yet, although newspapers can be a useful source, remember that they are only likely to provide a practical insight into companies and markets. As you are conducting a research project that also requires reference to theory and possible theoretical application, you must not confine your sources just to newspapers. The majority of your theoretical content will come from academic journals.

Academic journals

An *academic journal* can be defined as 'a peer-reviewed periodical containing scholarly articles in a particular field of study'. Unlike newspaper articles, articles in academic journals are different both in terms of content and the process of publication. Table 3.3 summarizes the key differences between a newspaper article and an article featured in an academic journal. Academic journals are rated on their quality and standing within the academic community. In general, the leading research tends to be published in top journals that are rated four or five stars. Still, this should not dissuade you from reviewing the other journals. Even those rated as one star are of a sufficient standard for you to refer to them in your research project.

Of course, there are a large number of academic journals in the discipline of business and management. Table 3.4 provides examples of some of the academic journals you may consider referring to when undertaking your research. This has been divided on the basis of Marketing, Human Resources (HR), Strategy and Finance. I have purposely chosen these journals to illustrate the plethora of different areas of research within each discipline. For example, some journals focus on a

TABLE 3.3 A comparison of academic and newspaper articles

Academic article	Newspaper article
Authors: Usually academics who are experts in their field. Most are affiliated to an academic institution.	Authors: Journalists. Usually one journalist will write an article. Their credentials are often not supplied.
Bibliography: A detailed list of references using the Harvard referencing system at the end of the article.	Bibliography: Often not featured within the article.
Content/structure: Specialist content, research based. Typical structure includes an abstract, introduction, literature review, methodology, analysis and results, conclusion and bibliography.	Content/structure: Based on current affairs and topics of general interest. Often in line with the view of the target readership, and generally in narrative format.
Length: Longer articles (typically 5,000–8,000 words) based on an analytical approach.	Length: Short articles.
Peer review: Often peer-reviewed by experts in the field. Reviewers may accept an article outright, or accept it subject to modifications, or decline it outright.	Peer review: Reviewed by the editor or editorial board of the newspaper.

TABLE 3.4 Academic journals

Subject	Journals
Marketing	• *Journal of Marketing* • *Asia-Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics* • *European Journal of Marketing* • *Journal of Marketing Management*
Human Resources	• *Journal of Human Resources* • *Human Resources for Health* • *Asia-Pacific Journal of Human Resources* • *Advances in Developing Human Resources*
Strategy	• *Business Strategy and the Environment* • *Journal of Business Strategy* • *Journal of Economics & Management Strategy* • *Strategy & Leadership*
Finance	• *Journal of Property Finance* • *Managerial Finance* • *Pacific Accounting Review* • *Accounting Review*

particular geographical region, such as the *Asia-Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, while others may focus on one specific area of research within a broader discipline, such as the *Journal of Property Finance*.

Table 3.4 is by no means exhaustive and does not include journal rankings. My intention here is not to list the most prestigious journals in each subject area, but to

provide you with an insight into some of the key journals that are likely to be relevant to your own research.

Textbooks

Textbooks need no introduction, as I know that you are likely to have read many different titles during the course of your study! As a potential source for your research project, they can prove invaluable. Yet you should still be careful when searching through the various titles covering your chosen topic. In short, make sure that you choose a good book. Jennifer Rowley and Frances Slack (2004: 33) propose that a good book should fulfil the following criteria:

- **It should be relevant to the research topic.**
- **It should be written by an authoritative author; the bibliographical details given in the book will summarize the author's experiences in the field.**
- **It should be up to date, as signalled by the publication date.**
- **It should be published by a reputable publisher in the discipline.**
- **It should include extensive reference to other associated literature.**
- **It should be clearly structured, well presented and easy to read.**

Certainly, textbooks can be a great source of information. By the time you begin working on your research project you should be very familiar with the layout, content and style of writing associated with textbooks. Of course, some textbooks tend to be more comprehensive than others. Typically, the larger texts that tend to focus on a broad discipline, such as Finance, Marketing or Human Resource Management, can be as long as nearly 1,000 pages. Although these may seem too general for your chosen topic, an interesting feature included in many of the leading textbooks is a glossary and company index. The former is helpful when generating key words associated with your study, while the latter can aid your research if you have decided to adopt a *case study approach*, i.e. you have chosen to research a particular company or companies.

Despite the obvious strengths associated with textbooks, the main downside is that they are unlikely to feature the latest innovative research. Moreover, textbooks do not always explore issues within a particular discipline in any great depth. In short, they are intended to cater for students engaged in a module over the course of one or two semesters, not as an aid to student researchers. Finally, remember that in some disciplines, especially those referring to the technology sector, material can soon become dated. Be wary of reviewing literature that may be deemed to be out of date, as this may impact on the credibility of your literature review.

Internet websites

In recent years, I have noticed an increasing number of students making reference to *Internet websites* within their research project. Given the growth in the Internet this is to be expected. Although Internet websites can provide ease of access to a wide

range of sources, you still need to take a cautious approach when searching through various websites. In considering whether or not to use a particular web-based source, you should determine the *reliability* of the source and its perceived standing among the academic community. First, reliability can be relatively easy to determine. For instance, most students are familiar with *Wikipedia*. Although Wikipedia claims to be the biggest multilingual free-content encyclopaedia on the Internet, there are questions over its reliability. It is unable to guarantee the accuracy of the information appearing on its website. For this reason, several colleges and universities prefer students to refrain from quoting from Wikipedia. Similarly, some external examiners prefer not to see Wikipedia featured among references. If in doubt whether or not you are able to use Wikipedia, check with your college or university.

In brief, the web is likely to be your main tool for locating relevant literature. The majority of researchers use a technique known as 'snowballing' to help build a database of relevant literature that can be used as part of their literature review. Snowballing means reading through relevant article references in order to locate other sources, then reading through those sources' references, and so on. Eventually, you know you are making progress when authors' names become familiar to you or the same references appear on a regular basis. Although the Internet holds a wealth of information, how you access, record and recognize data is vitally important. Martin Brett Davies (2007: 40) makes the following valid points when searching via the web:

1. When you are carrying out a net search – which will lead you in all manner of directions – be sure to make notes of the interesting and useful items and sites that you come across. You can use a Word file to do so, but while you're actively net searching, you may find it more efficient to make hand-written notes and references.
2. When you come across quotable items that you might want to include in your report, copy and paste them to a file straight away.
3. Save any good websites that you come across to your Favourites.
4. Remember that there is a lot of rubbish on the net. When you are using a search engine, make sure that what comes up is useful, true and reliable. Be discriminating and selective in your choices.
5. If you are stuck, your academic library will have information specialists who are there to guide you in your net searches. Make sure you can tell them just what it is that you are seeking, and be prepared to listen to their advice.

Google Scholar is another useful search tool for students. Released in November 2004, it is a freely available service that includes the content of scholarly documentation from a wide variety of sources. Google Scholar covers journals, books, conference proceedings, dissertations, technical reports, preprints and postprints, and other scholarly documents (Neuhaus and Hans-Dieter, 2008: 200).

Abstracts

An *abstract* is a summary of an article. The abstract is designed to give the reader a 'snapshot' of the article content. The majority of articles in academic journals

include an abstract. Essentially, it is a short overview (usually no more than 350 words) of the entire research. It is used as a helpful guide to researchers so that they can determine to what extent the article 'fits' with their own research. In short, it can be defined as a time-saving device: because it summarizes the study, the reader does not have to read the entire article. A search using key words within an abstract is a useful way of narrowing your search. If an abstract contains your key word, it is highly likely that the article is relevant to your research.

Catalogues

A *catalogue* contains a comprehensive list of sources held by a library. Increasingly, library catalogues tend to be electronic database systems. I have found that a useful source is copac.ac.uk (Copac, 2008). Copac is a freely available library catalogue, giving access to the merged online catalogues of many major UK and Irish academic and national libraries, as well as an increasing number of specialist libraries.

Dictionaries

A *dictionary* is a 'reference book containing words and other information'. Obviously, a dictionary, together with a thesaurus, is a very useful tool for any writer. A definition from a dictionary can be used if you intend defining a word or term for the benefit of your readers. As a general rule, the *Oxford English Dictionary* is the definitive dictionary. For example, if your intention was to critically review the body of literature on cultural theory, you may start by including a definition of culture from the *Oxford English Dictionary*. A range of definitions from established researchers in the field may then follow. There is no harm in consulting a range of dictionaries in order to get an eclectic mix of definitions.

Bibliographies

A *bibliography* is a comprehensive list of books, articles, Internet websites, magazines and other sources used in a particular study. A bibliography is often found towards the end of a book or journal. Its purpose is twofold: first, to acknowledge those authors whose work has been used when conducting the study, and second, to help other researchers engaged in a similar area of research. By including a bibliography, other researchers can save a great deal of time when conducting research.

Encyclopaedias

Quite simply, an *encyclopaedia* can be a book or more commonly a set of books that contains information on a wide range of topics. In this digital age, electronic versions tend to be more popular. As already mentioned, perhaps the most famous electronic

encyclopaedia is Wikipedia. It remains a popular source of information for students, but, once again, reliability remains a concern. Although an encyclopaedia may provide relatively detailed information on your chosen topic, it is unlikely that this will go into any great depth. Moreover, material published on your chosen topic is likely to be the work of one particular author. Therefore, it may be subject to bias and is probably based on a limited range of sources. Quite simply, the purpose of an encyclopaedia is to provide material of a practical nature, so you will find few references to specialist studies.

Citation indices

These provide an indication of the quality and expert nature of a piece of research, by showing how many times the work has been cited. In brief, it can help you to identify the leading authors in your subject area by indicating how many times their work has been referred to. Scopus (2008) (available online only, www.info.scopus.com) is the largest abstract and citation database of research literature and quality web sources for the social sciences. Once again, your library should allow you to access this particular facility.

In sum, this section has examined a range of possible sources you can consult when doing your literature review. The next step is to consider what to actually do with the literature. In essence, this involves conducting a critical review.

Critical Review

A key skill in doing a literature review is to be able to read and review literature *critically*. By improving your knowledge of your topic through reading a wide range of sources you are more likely to familiarize yourself with the major issues surrounding your research. Some key questions that you may ask to help you to critically review an article include:

1. **What is the main topic under review?**
2. **What are the results?**
3. **What methodology has the author(s) used? Is it appropriate?**
4. **What are the main issues raised by the author?**
5. **To what extent do the findings echo existing studies?**
6. **What questions are raised?**
7. **Is the article fair/biased?**
8. **How does the article relate to your own views?**
9. **Does the article display a contemporary view or are the findings/sources dated?**
10. **What are your own conclusions about the literature?**

Certainly, the above questions should provide you with a useful guide when attempting to critically review an article. They can also be put to good use when you are actually writing your own literature review, and are comparing, contrasting

and critically reviewing a range of literature within the review section of your research project. Personally, I have found that the critical nature of the literature review is something that some students find particularly difficult to grasp. Unfortunately, some fall into the trap of being overly descriptive. As a result, rather than ending up with a critical review, the final version of the review section ends up being an almost verbatim account of extracts from several different articles. This ultimately leads to a lower mark being awarded, as it falls some way short of actually critically reviewing the literature.

Structure of a Literature Review

Although adopting a critical approach is important, it is also essential that you structure your literature review in an appropriate way. Rowley and Slack (2004: 38) provide the following useful example of how to structure a literature review:

1. **Include basic definitions, e.g. What is business process re-engineering (BPR)? What is e-government?**
2. **Discuss why the subject is of interest, e.g. What impact can BPR have on business success? Why are e-government applications important and what is their scope?**
3. **Discuss what research has already been undertaken on the topic, and whether there is any research on aspects of the topic that need to be investigated, e.g. the application of BPR to support the delivery of e-government applications.**
4. **Provide a clear summary of the research opportunities and objectives that emerge from the literature review.**

A poorly structured literature review can be both irritating and confusing for the reader. In short, the structure of your literature review should include an introduction, the main body and a conclusion.

It can be argued that no one part of the review is more important than any other. However, I personally believe that it is important to start your literature review well by defining your topic, providing a clear rationale for selecting the topic, making clear your intentions, providing adequate background, and making reference to key authors.

Example of an introduction to a literature review

What follows is an example of an introduction to a literature review. Do not be too concerned about the nature of the topic. I have intentionally included an example that gives you an insight into content, thematic structure and referencing.

> This chapter discusses the development of research into relationships, interaction and networks. There is a huge body of literature on this subject, and many theories have been used to describe relationships. Understanding relationships and their importance is of great significance in Chinese culture, and

has resulted in a growing Western literature on the subject (Vanhonacker, 1997; Strange, 1998; Child, 2000; Stuttard, 2000). First, a brief overview of the IMP Group's key empirical findings illustrates the work of IMP and how it links to this study. Second, relationships will be discussed. There are many definitions of relationship. It must be emphasized that this study focuses on interorganizational rather than interpersonal relationships. Third, interaction and networks will be examined, in particular work conducted by the IMP Group. Finally, FDI relationships and the key constructs of commitment, trust and cooperation will be considered.

Main body of the review

This is where you discuss the range of sources that you consider particularly relevant to your study. It is important that you adopt a critical approach to your review and organize it so that it follows a logical structure for the reader. In general, there are three options governing the structure of your review. First, you may decide to follow a thematic approach. In other words, your review takes particular themes in the literature and discusses each one in turn. Next, a methodological approach to your structure may analyze qualitative studies first, followed by quantitative studies. If some studies have adopted a mixed methods approach, this may be your final section. Or you may choose to structure your review chronologically. This involves reviewing changes in the literature over time. For instance, a timeline could be incorporated to show how a series of economic events have changed people's perception of government. Whichever option you choose, remember that your literature review needs to have a 'natural flow'.

Conclusion to the review

Your conclusion should summarize the leading articles in your chosen topic, evaluate the existing position within the area of your research, and identify gaps in and possible future areas of research. Above all, you should make the link between existing research studies and your own. For example, are you incorporating any aspects of existing research, e.g. in terms of methodology, and if so, why?

How to present your literature review

The above section should provide a useful guide in terms of structure, yet students are also frequently unsure of how to *present* their literature review. The simple answer is that there are no hard-and-fast rules on presentation. Personally, I like to see a bit of variation when it comes to presenting the review. Tables are a great way of summarizing existing key studies in your chosen area. They provide not only an interesting 'snapshot' for the reader, but also make it easier for other researchers wishing to review research of a similar nature. Table 3.5 is an excellent example of

TABLE 3.5 Comparing definitions of trust in inter-firm relationships

Author(s)	Definition	Type of relationship
Anderson and Weitz (1989)	'One party's belief that its needs will be fulfilled in the future by actions undertaken by the other party'	Sales agencies and manufacturers in the electronic components sector
Aulakh et al. (1996)	'Degree of confidence the individual partners have on the reliability and integrity of each other'	Interorganizational relationships
Chow and Holden (1997)	'The level of expectation or degree of certainty in the reliability and truth/honesty of a person or thing'	Buyer–seller in the circuit board industry
Doney and Cannon (1997)	'Perceived credibility and benevolence of a target of trust'	Buyer–seller in manufacturing
Ganeson (1994)	'Trust is the willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence'	Retail buyers and vendors from department store chains
Morgan and Hunt (1994)	'Trust exists when one party has confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity'	Relationships between automobile tyre retailers and their suppliers
Sako and Helper (1998)	'An expectation held by an agent that its trading partner will behave in a mutually acceptable manner'	Supplier–manufacturer relationships in the auto industry

Source: Adapted from Raimondo (2000)

the type of table that can be incorporated into a literature review. As you can see, it includes all of the relevant information the reader would be interested in seeing, in this case: author(s), definitions and type of relationship.

Referencing under the Harvard system

I have already briefly mentioned the Harvard referencing system. In terms of referencing method, it remains the favoured choice for the majority of academic institutions. Following your own institution's guidelines on referencing is important as in some cases they may expect an alternative referencing system to be applied, or indeed, a slight variation on the Harvard system. Therefore, there is no excuse for not getting it right! Yet, perhaps surprisingly, poor referencing still appears to be a relatively common feature in student research projects. The next section should help you to overcome this problem by illustrating how to reference different sources within your references or bibliography.

Citing work using the Harvard system

How you cite your work in your references or bibliography is dependent on the source that you are referring to. However, no matter what the source, e.g. journal

article, book, magazine or newspaper, all your references need to be laid out alphabetically, with the first named author's surname determining where each reference goes.

Examples of how to reference using the Harvard system:

- ***For authored books***: Author's surname, initials (year of publication in brackets), ***title of the book in italics***, place of publication, publisher.

  For example: Jones, K. (2007). *Business Research*. London: Sage.

- ***For journal articles***: Author's surname, initials (year of publication in brackets), 'title of the article in inverted commas', ***title of the journal in italics***, **volume number in bold**, (issue number in brackets), page numbers.

  For example: Henderson, T. (1995). 'International marketing: Cross-cultural issues'. *Journal of Marketing*, **24** (4): 212–224.

- ***For papers published in edited books***: Author's surname, initials (year of publication in brackets), 'title of the paper in inverted commas', editor's surname, followed by the editor's initials, ***title of the book in italics***, place of publication, publisher, page numbers where the paper can be found.

  For example: Cole, A. (1996). 'Benchmarking in the UK retail sector', in Smith, L. (ed.) *International Business*. London: McGraw-Hill, pp. 12–19.

- ***For newspaper articles***: Author, initials, (year). Title of article. ***Full Title of Newspaper***, day and month of publication, page numbers and column line.

  For example: Slapper, G., 2005. Corporate manslaughter: new issues for lawyers. *The Times*, 3 Sep. p. 4b.

- ***Online newspaper articles***: Author and initials or corporate author, (year). Title of document or page. ***Name of newspaper***, [type of medium] additional date information. Available at: include website address/URL (uniform resource locator) and additional details of access, such as the routing from the home page of the source [Accessed date].

  For example: Chittenden, M., Rogers, L. and Smith, D., (2003). Focus: Targets Fail NHS. *Times Online*, [internet] 1 June. Available at: http://www.timesonline.co.uk/printFriendly/0..11-1506-669.html [Accessed 17 March 2005].

  NB: the URL should be underlined.

  It is good practice to keep a copy of the front page of any website you use.

- ***Author's name cited in the text***: When making reference to an author's work in your text, their name is followed by the year of publication of their work, in brackets (parentheses), and forms part of the sentence:

For example: Cormack (1994, pp. 32–33) states that 'when writing for a professional readership, writers invariably make reference to already published works'.

- *More than two authors for a work*: Where there are several authors (more than two), only the first author should be used, followed by 'et al.' meaning 'and others':

  For example: Green et al. (1995) found that the majority ...
  Or indirectly: Recent research has found that the majority of ... (Green et al., 1995).

- *More than one author cited in the text*: Where reference is made to more than one author in a sentence, and they are referred to directly, they are both cited:

  For example: Jones (1946) and Smith (1948) have both shown ...

What makes a good literature review?

By now, you should be familiar with the nature, approach and structure of a literature review. But what actually constitutes a good literature review? Zina O'Leary (2004: 81–82) cites a number of valid points that are worth considering when writing a good literature review. These are as follows:

- *Read a few good, relevant reviews.* There is no substitute for reading reviews produced in leading academic journals. By simply typing 'literature review' in the title search box of your search engine, you will probably find hundreds of articles that review literature within a particular topic.
- *Write critical annotations as you go.* If you begin sorting and organizing your annotations by themes, issues of concern, common shortcomings, etc., you may find that patterns begin to emerge. This can go a long way in helping you develop your own arguments.
- *Develop a structure.* We explored structure in the earlier section. Remember that your structure may alter as you discover new literature and your thinking evolves.
- *Write purposefully.* The literature review is driven by the researcher and needs to have and make a point. You can review literature without an agenda, but you cannot write a formal 'literature review' without one. Your audience should be able to readily identify the 'point' of each section of your review. If your audience does not know why you are telling them what you are telling them, you need to reconsider your approach.
- *Use the literature to back up your arguments.* It is important that when you make a statement or claim, you use supporting literature. For example, if you were to quote 'China is set to be the world's largest economy by the year 2020', then you must provide the source of the quote, e.g. 'China is set to be the world's largest economy by 2020' (Smith, 2005: 23).
- *Make doing the literature review an ongoing process.* As we have explored earlier, the literature review is a cyclical process. In reality, you should be conducting your review right up to a few weeks prior to your submission date.
- *Get plenty of feedback.* Writing a literature review is not an easy task, and your supervisor's expectations can vary widely. Don't wait until the last minute to begin the writing process or to get feedback. Be sure to pass a draft to your supervisor (although in some institutions this is not permitted), or anyone else willing to read it early on.
- *Be prepared to redraft.* It would be nice if first drafts and last drafts were the same draft. However, this is unlikely to be the case.

What makes a poor literature review?

You might think that what makes a poor literature review is essentially the opposite of what is listed above. That is certainly true to a point. Still, the following list of points are what I personally consider to be the more common mistakes made by students. Hopefully you will find these useful – not to copy, but to avoid at all costs!

- *No evidence of a literature review.* Thankfully this is somewhat of a rarity. Clearly, if you fail to include a literature review within your research project, it is likely to signal to your reader that you have failed to acknowledge work carried out by specialists in your chosen subject area. In addition, given that the literature review is a major part of your project, failure to include it will almost certainly mean a significant deduction in marks.
- *Poor length.* Your work is also likely to suffer if your review is of insufficient length. A question that I am often asked is 'How long should I make my literature review?' In general, this largely depends on your research approach – whether it is inductive or deductive. However, a useful guide is that your review is likely to be in the region of 25–30% of your overall word count.
- *Denser referencing required.* Although a review may be of sufficient length, sometimes a drawback is that a student has failed to include adequate reference to previous work in the main text. This suggests that the student has failed to examine the wide range of sources available to them. It also indicates that the student perhaps has not given enough time to carrying out their literature review.
- *The literature review is largely a verbatim reproduction of the original texts.* Unfortunately, sometimes students 'fall into the trap' of purely citing extracts from previous work in their subject area. As a result, the review becomes a very list-like style of writing. Of course, what they should be doing is adopting a critical approach to their review.
- *Poor structure.* A muddled, poorly structured review makes it difficult for the reader to fully grasp the nature of the research.
- *Literature does not correspond to research objectives.* Identifying and reviewing literature that is not relevant to a set of objectives shows poor understanding of the topic. In principle, if you fully understand your objectives, parameters and key words, then it should be easy to avoid citing work that is not relevant to your own study.

RESEARCH IN ACTION

Conducting a systematic literature review

The article below is taken from the *Journal of Knowledge Management*: 'Knowledge Management in SMEs: A literature review', Durst, S. and Edvardsson, I.R. (2012)

In this article, the authors undertake a systematic literature review of 36 refereed empirical articles on knowledge management and small and medium sized enterprises. The aim of the paper is to examine the current status of research in knowledge management (KM) in SMEs. The research questions are as follows:

- Which knowledge management topics are well researched and which are not?
- Which were the main findings of the studies?

- Which methods were used?
- How does the research handle the particular challenges small firms are facing regarding knowledge management?

The methodology of the literature review is explicitly set out within the paper. The methodology begins by explaining what is meant by a systematic review and the principles adopted when carrying out the review. In this case, the authors explain the process as beginning with mapping the field through a scoping review, followed by a comprehensive literature search, quality assessment, data extraction, synthesis and writing up.

First, the authors set out a research plan comprising the research questions, keywords, and details of inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria were: publications in the period of 2001–2011, empirical research papers, peer-reviewed, English language, SME focus on knowledge management and knowledge management processes, and ProQuest database. Conversely, any publications outside this timeframe, papers and reports that did not meet these criteria, and other databases were excluded from the review. The authors used an Excel data sheet to record the 'key elements' of each article. This consisted of the name of the author(s), year of publication, research aim/objectives, theoretical perspective/framework, method, main findings and name of the journal.

Second, the comprehensive literature search began with both authors accessing the ProQuest database to look for suitable articles. This process involved undertaking a key word search using 'knowledge management' and 'SMEs'. However, the researchers found that the search produced only a small number of publications. Refining the search to using 'KM' in combination with 'SMEs' resulted in 398 hits. This illustrates the importance of experimenting with a number of different key word searches when doing your own research. Durst and Edvardsson (2012) also included the highest ranked journals in their chosen area of research to make sure that the work by key authors was included in the review. In addition, three international journals in the field of small business were reviewed, thus resulting in an additional 697 hits.

Third, quality assessment entailed both authors reading through the abstracts and, if relevant, any other sections of the articles to make sure that they covered the pre-defined scope. This process yielded a final selection of 36 articles which fulfilled the criteria set and allowed for the analysis stage to be carried out.

Fourth, data extraction of the 36 papers was undertaken by dividing the papers among the two authors. Thus, each author read 18 papers. Both researchers then entered the relevant data regarding the research aim in the spreadsheet and jointly went through each data entry and discussed the content. If any of the authors had any reservations about one particular paper, then both authors went through the paper in question. The rationale behind this is to ensure consistency in terms of analysis and conclusions drawn.

Fifth, at the synthesis stage, the final Excel sheet was jointly discussed. This discussion enabled the authors to categorize the findings under KM themes, which, in turn, helped to clarify what is known about knowledge management in SMEs and to which KM areas the body of knowledge is limited.

Sixth, the final stage of the review process was devoted to writing up the findings.

The above article demonstrates one approach to conducting a literature review, and clearly shows the different steps that the authors went through when reviewing the literature. You will find many examples of literature-review-based articles on electronic databases such as Emerald and Business Source Premier. Irrespective of the

topic, reading these types of articles will give you a good insight into how to condu your own literature review, particularly in terms of structure and writing style.

A final reminder!

Remember that searching and critically reviewing the literature is likely to be major part of your research project. After all, it is essential to acknowledge what h already been written. A thorough review will ensure that you have understood a identified the key authors who have published in your area.

Fundamentally, searching and reviewing the literature is a process that you shou continue to undertake right up to a few weeks prior to submission. Moreover, ma sure that you include a range of contemporary references. On occasion, I have re projects where the reference list contains little in the way of references post-2000. Th illustrates a failure on the part of the student to actively seek the latest publications their chosen topic.

Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter we have looked at various issues relating to conducting a literatu review. The literature review is likely to be a major part of your research project. essence, a literature review not only allows you to better understand your topic, b also allows you to identify 'gaps' and provides evidence of research. Here are th key points from this chapter:

- In the context of your research, 'literature' means all sources of published material.
- A literature review can be described as identifying, evaluating and critically assessing wh has been published on your chosen topic.
- You are required to demonstrate library and information skills, the intellectual capability justify decisions on the choice of relevant ideas, and the ability to assess the value of tho ideas in context (Hart, 1998: 9).
- Think of the literature review as a process. Before you begin conducting your review of t literature you need to be clear about your objectives and research questions.
- When conducting your literature review, it is likely that you will use a wide source of literatu
- Reading journal articles is a great way to understand how to conduct a literature review.
- A key skill to doing a literature review is to be able to read and review literature critically.
- Searching the literature should be carried out until a few weeks prior to your submission dat

CASE STUDY — Writing a Successful Literature Review

Dirk has recently completed a workshop on how to write a literature review. Following the workshop, he felt a lot more confident in terms of how to approach the literature review for his own research project. He now realizes that key success factors include: reading relevant

sources, developing a coherent structure, reviewing the literature as an ongoing process, and being prepared to redraft. However, he is unable to recall other important factors that the lecturer highlighted during the workshop, in particular, how to approach presentation, structure and writing style.

Case study question

- What other factors does Dirk need to consider if he is going to write a successful literature review?

YOU'RE THE SUPERVISOR

Sarah has emailed you a draft of her literature review. The final paragraph of her review reads as follows:

> Henderson (2011) provides the most interesting study into leadership across cultures as it includes respondents from a range of different cultural backgrounds. His findings argue that cultural factors play a significant part in influencing leadership. I may make reference to this seminal piece of work later on in my own research.

Supervisor question

- What are the problems associated with finishing a literature review in this way and how would you advise Sarah to conclude her review?

COMMON QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. How long should my literature review be?

Answer: This varies, and the word limit and views of your supervisor must be considered. For example, if you are working on the basis of a 10,000 word limit, then clearly one would expect to see a shorter literature review than if you were working towards completing a 15,000 word project. Your supervisor is likely to have his or her own opinions as to the appropriate length of your review. Also, noting the weighting of marks towards the literature review is a useful indicator. For instance, again, if you are working towards a 10,000 word project and 25% of the marks are allocated for literature review, then you can aim at writing in the region of 2,000–3,000 words. Finally, the amount of relevant literature and availability of sources are also factors. If you find that there is very little written on your subject, then perhaps your topic is too narrow. Conversely, if your topic is too broad, this will have a detrimental effect on your review because you will be unable to cover all relevant themes.

2. How do I write a literature review?

Answer: One of the most commonly asked questions by my project students is 'How do I write a literature review?' As noted earlier, the literature review is a process and should contain key

features, such as: definitions of key terms; discuss why the subject is of interest; discuss research already undertaken; and provide a clear summary of the research opportunities and objectives that emerge from the literature review. Although you may know the structure and key features of a literature review, you may still feel apprehensive about actually writing your review. Although the likelihood is that you have been taught how to write a review as part of a workshop or research methods module, there is no substitute for reading literature reviews featured in leading academic journals. Literature review based articles give you an excellent insight into: structuring your literature review, adopting a critical approach, referencing your work, and summarizing and making a link to your own work. As a helpful guide, in the further reading section at the end of the chapter I have included details of three literature review articles. These have been purposely chosen as they are all on business-related topics and provide a basis in which you can learn how to form and develop your own review. Do not be too concerned if the topic does not fall into your chosen area of research. The important thing is to get a 'feel' for the writing style and how to produce a good literature review.

3. How many chapters shall I devote to my literature review?

Answer: This is often a matter of personal choice. However, I suggest that you seek advice on this from your project supervisor. In most cases, the majority of my students tend to devote one chapter to the literature review. This is generally for two reasons. First, the 10,000 word limit means that devoting more than one chapter to the review may mean that other sections of the project do not receive adequate attention. Second, the thematic nature of the chosen topic can easily be covered within one chapter. Sometimes a literature review may be based on two chapters. This might be because one chapter focuses on a more practical element, e.g. a case study, while the second chapter reviews relevant theoretical content. Again, if in doubt, discuss with your project supervisor.

4. What type and how many sources do I need to include in my literature review?

Answer: As you are conducting an academic piece of work there must be a certain number of academic sources within your research project, and this includes material from academic journals. Using other sources such as newspapers, magazines and websites is fine, as long as you also include academic sources such as academic journals and textbooks. In terms of websites, try to avoid obscure websites as the information they provide is likely to be unreliable. Moreover, try to avoid over-reliance on web-based sources. In short, it is best to use a range of sources when writing your literature review, although one would expect the majority of these sources to be 'academic based'. In terms of number of sources, this is difficult to answer as it depends on several factors; for example, amount of literature, chosen topic, university regulations, etc. Your referencing should be relatively dense and not rely too heavily on a small number of sources.

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