

## Searching and reviewing the literature

Wood et al. (2009) note that one difficulty is that reading journal articles on your potential topic probably will not give you a good sense of work in the area. Alternatively, they recommend reading a general textbook or "reader" in the area in order to learn key terms, theories and studies. The latter will include the kinds of methods that are typically used. In addition, review articles and special issues of journals can help to identify key issues and "will also give you the basis for evaluating and critiquing that research, and building a rationale for your own study" (Woods et al., 2009, p. 39).

Woods et al. also recommend gathering as many primary sources as possible. It often helps to begin by reading articles that have been influential in the area, which is indicated by the number of times they have been cited.

One strategy for developing your ideas and finding a gap in the literature is to read the future research section of recent journal articles in the area of interest to you. Your supervisor may also be able to suggest new lines of research or a particular phenomenon that could be explored in your research. The latter case is likely to occur when the research area is one in which your supervisor publishes. Wood et al. (2009) suggest that it can be useful to summarize each article that you find in your literature search by filling in index cards (or completing an Excel spreadsheet) with the following information:

- The full reference for the study
- What was the research question?
- What population (or populations) were being sampled and/or compared?
- What design was used?
- What method of analysis was used?
- What were the results?
- What theories informed the study and were used to make sense of the results?
- Whose research is cited as central to the study? (p. 43)

Summarizing and evaluating this information should help to discover gaps in the literature, which provides a rationale for your study.

It is important that your rationale is not simply to replicate a previous study without good reasons for undertaking this work (in contrast, validation of a new measure would be a reasonable basis for study). Accordingly, you need to provide good theoretical reasons for your research and this should combine in a coherent manner with the use of a particular methodology in relation to a particular population or sample. Considering these issues in your research proposal will demonstrate the originality of your work without requiring you to create something so new that there are no obvious connections with previous theories and studies.

## The research question and design

By this stage you should have found most of the relevant articles and studies you need to review your potential research area, identified a gap in the literature, considered theoretical issues and begun to consider any practical and ethical considerations that might affect your research.

Woods et al. (2009) point out that your research question should be able to pass the "so what?" test. That is, it should be possible to coherently and convincingly justify your proposed study in response to this challenge. With quantitative research, the broad research question and hypotheses should be

consistent. They note that a mismatch between the research question and a hypothesis "is a serious error and will result in lost marks" (p. 46).

For qualitative research, the same concern with consistency between the research question and specific hypotheses does not exist. Instead, specific issues to be discussed with participants and also the method that is used should be consistent with the overall research question and theoretical framework. For example, it would not make sense to use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to explore different perspectives on a particular phenomenon. For example, exploring the experiences of young people caring for parents with a mental illness (and perhaps a specific mental illness such as depression) using an approach that focuses on experience would seem inappropriate also when seeking also to interview parents. An alternative approach using either thematic analysis or which employs a realistic framework (e.g., grounded theory) and can contrast different views would be easier to justify. Naturally, the "so what" challenge also applies to qualitative research and requires a careful response particularly when the proposed research could raise topics that are sensitive or emotional for participants (see the section on ethical issues and cost-benefit analyses with regard to research that may cause distress to participants).

Ideally, your dissertation should reflect:

- a thorough reading and understanding of the relevant literature
- appropriate selection of material and demonstration of your ability to synthesise material
- a good grasp of the relevant theoretical and methodological issues (including any practical implications)
- a critical stance (in relation to the literature and your own research) and an ability to evaluate evidence, drawing appropriate conclusions and acknowledging ambiguity
- a logical and coherent presentation of arguments
- clarity of presentation
- a fluent style

### Introduction:

The introduction reviews the relevant literature, describes the setting in which the research is carried out, and delineates the questions that are to be the focus of the report.

The literature review should be succinct (that is, you should not attempt to describe a whole body of literature in detail, but focus on those areas which are relevant to your aims and questions) and should link directly to your own investigation. You should be critical in your approach and be clear about areas of disagreement, in terms of theories or research findings, and any relevant methodological issues should be addressed. Any extended discussion of choice of method should be here rather than in the method section.

At first glance, this section might appear to be repeating material from the section on writing the research proposal. However, there is a huge difference between summarising the literature for a brief research proposal and the type of thorough, detailed, critical, well-structured and tailored review that is required for the introduction section of your research report.

Accordingly, the emphasis here is on assembling the material you have found to write the dissertation. In this respect, you will need to review relevant theories and studies in a clear and coherent manner in order to introduce your study. The brief account of the literature you gave in

your research proposal should be fleshed out with the details of previous work and in such a way that the rationale for your study is also convincingly developed.

Often when submitting journal articles, experienced researchers with many publications talk of telling the story of the research. This story should develop in a manner that makes sense to the reader and guides them through the literature using, for the most part, the most recent articles available in the literature. Accordingly, you should not spend too much time summarizing the details of contributions, which are, for example, 20 or more years old.

An exception to this rule is when an early contribution in the literature continues to be important because either the theory or method is still prominent in the relevant literature, or your research addresses a relatively old idea with a novel method or new group of research participants.

Although the opening sections of the introduction should be relatively brief, it is often useful to give your reader a brief summary of the structure that you will develop. In such cases, you can refer to parts or sections of the introduction that correspond to main headings. It is important to note that the headings and sections do not need to be numbered and also that you can use subheadings to further divide topics and issues in your introduction (e.g., see APA guide on conventions for headings and subheadings).

In some cases, examining the headings can also help to review the way that you are introducing the literature to your reader. For example, headings may appear to move from general to increasingly specific points.

The introduction does not simply describe previous research or evaluate all the positive and negative features in a comprehensive and thorough way. Rather, the introduction examines the existing research literature in a way that builds a rationale for your research project.

In contrast to the task of writing a research proposal, the rationale for your dissertation will need to be thorough and very well organised. The way you structure your sections and the overall argument of the introduction should demonstrate your mastery of the literature, and your understanding of the significance and contribution that your research will hopefully make to the literature. While you should be critical of previous research this does not mean, as mentioned above, that you must be negative or dismissive of all previous research. Rather you need to evaluate prior research and point out any limitations in a way that is balanced and relevant to your research.

At this point, your study aim or aims (for a qualitative study) or specific hypotheses (for a quantitative study) should be introduced. Using the future tense, a hypothesis or series of hypotheses should be stated about what will happen or is expected or predicted to happen.