



# Tips for Conducting a Literature Review

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# What is a Literature Review?

A literature review is an account of what has been published on your topic of interest. A review is often a required part of grant and research proposals, a chapter in theses and dissertations, or a section in a research report. According to Taylor and Procter (2001), in writing the literature review, your purpose is to convey to your reader what knowledge and ideas have been established on a topic, and what their strengths and weaknesses are.

Generally, the purpose of a review is to critically analyze a segment of a published body of knowledge through summary, classification, and comparison of prior research studies, reviews of literature, and theoretical articles. The literature review is not merely a descriptive list of the material available, or a set of summaries of relevant resources. Instead, it provides the framework of your research investigation and summarizes the literature you studied in order to develop your research study.

# Why do a Literature Review?

According to Bourner (1996) there are good reasons for spending time and effort on a review of the literature before embarking on a research project. These reasons include:

- ❖ Find gaps in the literature
- ❖ Avoid reinventing the wheel (at the very least this will save time and it can stop you from making the same mistakes as others)
- ❖ Build on the platform of existing knowledge and ideas
- ❖ Learn about other people working in the same field (a researcher network is a valuable resource)
- ❖ Identify important works about your topic
- ❖ Provide the intellectual context for your own work, enabling you to position your project relative to other work
- ❖ Learn about opposing views
- ❖ Discover information and ideas that may be relevant to your project
- ❖ Identify research methods that could be relevant to your project

# How do I do a Literature Review?

## Selecting Sources for the Literature Review

A good literature review requires a good literature search. A literature search is an exhaustive search of the resources and information about your research topic. (See **Tips on Conducting a Literature Search** for a practical guide to finding resources.) Once you have identified the key resources for your topic, you then need to describe, critique and relate each source to the subject of the inquiry. This prepares you to organize your literature review logically (Afolabi 1992). According to Merriam and Simpson (1989) a reviewer can ask the following questions to assist in making decisions for relevance:

1. Is the author of the source an authority on the topic, one who has done much work in the area? Do other authors refer to his or her work as successful and useful?
2. When was the article or book written? As a rule, the more recent work in an area should be included in a review.
3. What exactly was written about or tested? If a particular resource or research study is highly relevant to your present research interest, it should be included even if the “who” and “when” criteria are not met.
4. What is the quality of the source? A thoughtful analysis, a well-designed study, or an original way of viewing the topic probably indicates that a source is a very significant piece of literature.

## Writing the Literature Review

Once you have collected the relevant sources to be included in your literature review, you are ready to start writing! The UW-Madison Writing Center (2003) provides a clear outline for organizing your written review:

### Introduction

- ❖ Define or identify your general topic, issue, or area of concern, thus providing an appropriate context for reviewing the literature.
- ❖ Point out overall trends in what has been published about the topic; or conflicts in theory, methodology, evidence, and conclusions; or gaps in research and scholarship; or a single problem or new perspective of immediate interest.
- ❖ Establish your reason (point of view) for reviewing the literature; explain the criteria you used to analyze and compare literature;

outline the organization or sequence of your review ; and, when necessary, state why certain literature is or is not included (scope).

## **Body**

- ❖ Organize research studies and other types of literature (reviews, theoretical articles, case studies, etc.) according to common denominators such as research methodology, specific purpose or objective, chronology, etc.
- ❖ Summarize individual studies or articles with as much or as little detail as each merits according to its comparative importance in the literature. (You can determine comparative importance by the number of times a piece of research is mentioned in other research.)
- ❖ Provide the reader with strong “umbrella” sentences at beginnings of paragraphs, “signposts” throughout, and brief “so what” summary sentences at intermediate points in the review to aid in understanding of your comparisons and analyses.

## **Conclusion**

- ❖ Summarize major contributions of significant studies and articles to the body of knowledge under review, maintaining the focus established in the introduction.
- ❖ Evaluate the current “state of the art” for the body of knowledge reviewed, pointing out major methodological flaws or gaps in research, inconsistencies in theory and findings, and area or issues pertinent to future study.
- ❖ Conclude by providing some insight into the relationship between the central topic of the literature review and a larger area of study such as a discipline, a scientific endeavor, or a profession.

## Some Helpful Reminders for Doing a Literature Review

According to Merriam and Simpson (1989), the process of doing a literature review can be roughly divided into two parts: (1) the research process and (2) the writing of the review. The following summation will make both parts of the process easier:

1. Read generally for an overview of your overall research area before defining your topic precisely.
2. Define the limits of the review. Too broad a topic will overwhelm you with material; too narrow a topic might mean that you will overlook related work or not find enough material when you conduct your search. For example:

**Too broad:** Health and literacy

**Too narrow:** The reading skills of Pakastani Women literacy learners living with HIV/AIDS in Kitchener

**Just right:** How does learners' health effect learning outcomes in LBS programs?

3. Locate a reasonable number of sources and begin reading those sources.
4. Establish criteria for selecting materials that will be included in the review.
5. Continue the search until you start noticing that you find the same sources no matter where you search. This is sometimes referred to as the saturation point in the research process.
6. Arrange the material reviewed into categories that are suggested by the material itself. (E.g. By topic, by date range, by region, etc.)
7. Structure the review into three parts: introductory material, the body of the review, and a concluding section.

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