

## Literature Reviews

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### 1. **What is a Literature Review?**

A literature review is simply a summary of what existing scholarship knows about a particular topic. It is always based on secondary sources – that is, what other people have already written on the subject; it is not concerned about discovering new knowledge or information. As such, it is a prelude to further research, a digest of scholarly opinion.

A literature review should focus only on the relevant academic literature: popular or non-academic sources may be brought in occasionally to illustrate a point, but the central interest is always on the data collected or the theories put together by recognised experts in the field.

A literature review will try to look at as much of this existing research as possible. It will review major scholarly books in the relevant area, but will also take a keen interest in journal articles, which in many subjects give more up-to-date material.

Preparing a literature review thus involves:

- Searching for reliable, accurate and up-to-date material on the topic or subject
- Reading and summarising the key points from this literature
- Synthesising these key ideas, theories and concepts into a summary of what is known
- Discussing and evaluating these ideas, theories and concepts
- Identifying particular areas of debate or controversy
- Preparing the ground for the application of these ideas to new research

## 2. Choosing Material

Ask yourself questions such as these:

1. What is the **specific question, topic or focus** for my assignment?
2. What **kind of material do I need**? Theory? Methodology? Policy? Empirical data?
3. What type of literature is *available* (e.g., journals, books, government documents)?
4. What kind of literature is particularly *authoritative* in this academic discipline (e.g. psychology, sociology, pharmacy)?
5. Has my search been wide enough to ensure I have identified all the relevant material?
6. On the other hand, has the search been narrow enough to *exclude* irrelevant material?
7. Is there a *good enough* sample of literature for the level (Ph.D, Master's, undergraduate) of my dissertation or thesis?
8. Have I considered as many *alternative points of view* as possible?
9. Will the reader find my literature review **relevant, appropriate, and useful**?

## 3. Searching for Good Material

Make sure that all the literature you review is as up-to-date as possible. The sole exception would be 'classic texts' such as major works written by the leading scholars setting out formative ideas and theories central to your subject.

A good literature review will have a good range of material setting out as many different perspectives as possible. Try to get a good balance between substantial academic books and more recent journal articles.

A good place to start is with a bibliography. For undergraduate dissertations, look first at the bibliography provided with the module documentation. Choose one or two likely looking books or articles and then scan through the bibliographies provided by these authors. Skim read some of this material looking for clues: can you use these leads to identify key theories and authors or track down other appropriate material?

Another approach is to try entering a few keywords into library catalogue search engines. You will almost certainly have to try a range of different words to capture as many items as possible. But avoid over-generalisations: if you type in something as broad as 'social theory' you are likely to get several thousand results! Try to be specific: for example, 'Heidegger, existentialism'. Ideally, you should narrow the field down so you get just a few dozen results. Skim through these quickly to identify texts which are most likely to be helpful.

If this does not produce enough material, browse along the library shelves in the relevant subject area and look at any of the books that catch your eye. Check the contents and index pages to see if they are likely to help; if not, put the book back and try again.

You could also ask one of the subject librarians for further help. Your

supervisor might be able to point you in the direction of some of the important literature, though remember this is your literature search, not theirs!

For recent journal articles you will almost certainly need to use one of the online search engines. These can be found on the 'Indexing Services' button on the Templeman Library website. Kent students based at Medway still need to use the Templeman pages to access online journals, although you can get to these pages through the Drill Hall Library catalogue. Take a look as well at the Subject Guides on both the Templeman and DHL websites.

There is no answer to the question 'how many books and journal articles should I review?' It all depends on the length of the dissertation, the nature of the subject, the focal point of interest, the level of study (undergraduate, Masters, Ph.D) and so on. Obviously, if your dissertation is going to be mostly an interaction with existing scholarship you need a longer literature review than if your subject involves new empirical research. Nor are you expected to know about everything written on your subject, especially at undergraduate level.

The key point is that you should aim to use the literature review to set out the boundaries of existing knowledge in your chosen area: what have other important scholars already said about this subject? Watch out for the obvious gaps!

So, how many books and articles? Enough! Maybe – as a very rough and ready rule of thumb – 8-10 significant pieces (books and/or articles) for a 8,000 word dissertation, up to 20 major pieces of work for 12-15,000 words, and so on. But use your judgement!

#### 4. **Assessing the Literature**

Skim through the books and articles identified as potentially relevant. Focus particularly on obvious 'helps' such as chapter summaries, journal abstracts, and even the index. Look for clues: how will this piece of literature contribute to your study (if at all)? If the answer is 'not much' then choose something different.

Now re-read the chosen material carefully. Look especially for:

1. The key point discussed by the author: is this clearly defined?
2. What evidence has the author produced to support this central idea?
3. How convincing are the reasons given for the author's point of view?
4. Could the evidence be interpreted in other ways?
5. What is the author's research method (e.g. qualitative, quantitative, experimental, etc.)?
6. What is the author's theoretical framework (e.g. psychological, developmental, feminist)?
7. What is the relationship assumed by the author between theory and practice?
8. Has the author critically evaluated the other literature in the field?
9. Does the author include literature opposing her/his point of view?
10. Is the research data valid– i.e. based on a reliable method and accurate information?
11. Can you "deconstruct" the argument – identify the gaps or jumps in the logic?
12. What are the strengths and limitations of this study?
13. What does this book or article contribute to my own topic or thesis?

As you ask these questions, make sure you also take careful notes on the

content of each book or journal article. You will need these notes for your later summary. Keep the references!

## 5. **Developing the Literature Review**

A literature review is made up of a series of 'mini book reviews' on material read for the assignment. But remember: a good book review always has at least two distinct components:

- A brief summary of the content of the book/article together with an equally brief description of the importance of this piece of research for your own study – why include this particular book or article? Remember, most books or articles are usually making just ONE key point; so, what is that one point in this particular book/article, and how does that claim relate to your own research project or assignment?
- A critique of the book or article: this involves an analysis of the argument, including an assessment of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the evidence presented. Does the author produce sufficient evidence to establish the point they want to make? What has conveniently been left out or skated over? Where is the counter-argument, and has the author dealt with this adequately? What is the author not saying, what would contradict their argument, and so on. Look carefully for the holes in the presentation; remember, every author is spinning the evidence to make it show what they want it to show. Can you spin the same evidence in another direction? If so, what impact would this have on the overall argument? What if this particular author is completely wrong? Or, perhaps more likely, what if this particular author is only partially right? What difference would that make to your understanding of the topic?

## 6. **Placing the Literature Review in the Dissertation/Thesis**

There is some discussion amongst academics about the position of the literature review:

- The 'traditional' place is immediately after the introduction to the dissertation or thesis – the second section or chapter after an initial sketch of the project
- Some scholars prefer the literature review to be placed after the presentation of empirical evidence so that the literature review acts as a kind of foil to the main findings. This is fairly common in the qualitative (broadly ethnographic) tradition
- Some scholars, especially in the qualitative tradition, prefer the literature review to be distributed over the assignment as a whole, so the entire dissertation or thesis reads like an on-going conversation between empirical research and scholarly theory

So, this is probably one of the (many!) things you will want to discuss with your supervisor. But unless you have been told otherwise, it is almost certainly better to play safe and put the literature review in the 'traditional slot' after the introduction.

## 7. **Structuring the Literature Review**

Try to build the literature review around your key topic or thesis: be relentless – show how each piece of literature contributes to, or challenges, your central theme.

The overall structure of the section or chapter should be just like any other: it should have a beginning, middle and end. In other words, you need to guide

the reader through the literature review, outlining the strategy you have adopted for selecting the books or articles, presenting the topic theme for the review, then using most of the word limit to analyse the chosen books or articles thoroughly before pulling everything together briefly in the conclusion.

By far the most common approach to the central 'presentation of the evidence' section is to work systematically through the books or articles selected. A paragraph or two is usually enough on each item, but remember you will need for each book or article comments on:

- The content – a brief summary of the main ideas and evidence
- The strengths and weaknesses of the argument – the all-important critique
- The relevance of the book or article for your particular project: how does this contribute to your own thinking and/or research?

If you are writing a Ph.D thesis, then the literature review is typically one chapter (perhaps 8-10,000 words), but this can vary enormously, depending on your subject. Ask your supervisor!

If you are writing a Master's dissertation, your literature review should probably be around 2-3,000 words, again depending on a wide range of factors. Ask your supervisor!

If you are writing an undergraduate dissertation, your literature review will probably be about 2,000 words – but the same principle applies: ask!

One variation on the traditional linear approach is to organise your literature review into historical order. Others prefer to start with the main theories and give more space to these, leaving the less important stuff for later.

Some people prefer a less linear approach. Instead of simply working through a list of 8-20 items on your book review list, you might want to try a thematic approach, grouping key ideas, facts, concepts or approaches together and then bouncing the ideas off each other. This is a slightly more creative (and interesting) way of doing the review, but a little more risky – it is easy with this approach to lose coherence and logical sequencing.

Whichever approach you adopt, make sure everything flows smoothly – that one idea or book leads neatly to the next. Take your reader effortlessly through a sequence of thought that is clear, accurate, precise and interesting.

## 8. **Writing Up the Literature Review**

As with essays generally, only attempt to write up the literature review when it is 'ripe' – that is, when you have done all the reading, note-taking and planning for the chapter or section, and allowed yourself adequate thinking-time'.

Then start writing. Find a neat way of introducing the review, then guide the reader through the material clearly and directly. Use evidence – never make unsubstantiated claims, but back everything up with argument and data. Avoid too many quotes and always give references for any quotation. Sometimes students use long quotation as a way of padding out the essay or in an attempt to cover up a lack of understanding. Don't do this: it always shows, and will be picked up by the marker. Always summarise material in your own words as much as possible. Save the quotes for 'punch-lines' to drive the point home.

- Be selective in the number of points you draw out from each piece of literature; remember that part of the object of the exercise is to show your tutors that you can use your judgement to identify what is central and what is secondary
- Summarise and synthesise – use your own words to sum up what you think is important or controversial about the book or article
- Be cautious - never claim more than the evidence will support. Too many dissertations and theses are ruined by exaggerated or sweeping generalisations. Be tentative and careful in the way you interpret the evidence
- Keep your own voice – you are entitled to your own point of view provided it is based on the evidence presented. Having said that, make sure you back up your opinions with clear argument, and on the whole, it is usually better to avoid too much 'I' language; better to be a little more indirect and tentative ('this tends to suggest', 'it could be argued' and so on)
- Revise, revise, revise: refine and edit the draft as much as you can. Check for fluency, structure, evidence and referencing. Don't forget the basics: grammar and spelling!