

References & Further Reading

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Literature Review

Getting Started



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Where Literature Reviews Go Wrong?

- They fail to provide the underpinnings of methodology, hypotheses, guiding questions.
- They draw on outdated or limited view of issues.
- They fail to address the latest literature.
- They present a biased or limited view of issues.
- They avoid difficult, conflicting material.
- They are too short and/or superficial.
- They describe but do not critically appraise the literature.
- They organise the literature article by article, not by themes.
- They present a collection of facts and the opinions of others rather than a considered authorial review.
- They do not provide summaries or evaluations and therefore leave the reader unsure of key points being made.

Avoid these mistakes!

Now that you have gained a better understanding of what a literature review is about, please visit The Learning Centre website for more information on how to write a literature review.

http://unilife.curtin.edu.au/learning_support/writing_skills.htm



Answering these questions will help you gain a better understanding about your research topic.

What is a Literature Review?

The Literature Review is the foundation of your thesis, establishing your position within your discipline's scholarly community. It usually constitutes the second chapter of your thesis, and it lends authority to the following chapters. It contains summaries and critical analyses of reported research relating to aspects of your research question or proposition and the methods available to address the question. Every successful thesis has a strong, relevant, well-structured literature review at its heart.

Function

The literature review:

- provides the context for research
- acknowledges the work of others
- familiarises you with the disciplinary 'conversation'
- establishes your thesis in the chain of research in your field
- informs and modifies your own research
- identifies an appropriate research question
- finds evidence to establish the need for the proposed research

- shows an examiner you are familiar with important research in your area
- demonstrates to an examiner your critical understanding of theory

Relevance

Ensure that every text you include in your literature review does **one or more** of the following:

- deals with theory that underpins the thesis,
- makes a definitive statements about an aspect of your study,
- deals with your subject area or overlaps it,
- shows your acknowledgement of the work of others in the research field,
- assists in building up a coherent argument,
- puts your work into an external context,
- defines the current state of research in your area.

Use the 'So what?' test for every reference – be able to justify its inclusion in your literature review.

Evaluate Perspective

A competent literature review

- avoids merely presenting a description of the literature and previous work on the topic.
- comments on the value of the literature summarised in *the previous*

- clearly presents your argument and perspective in relation to the literature review.
- Correctly interprets the findings of the reviewed literature and its relevance to your research question/hypothesis.

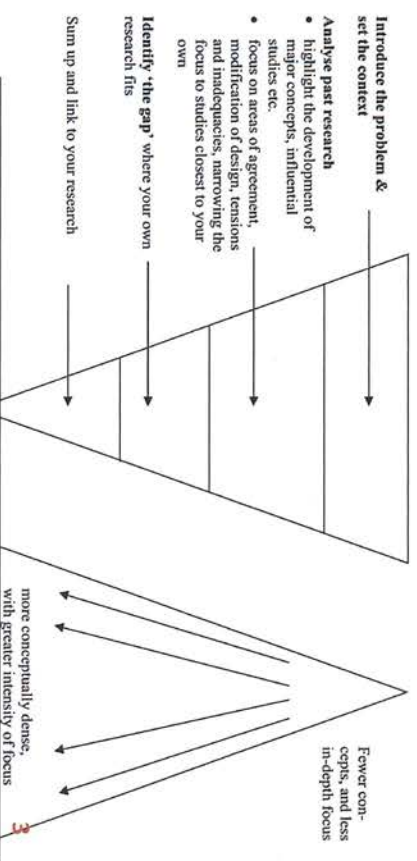
Organisation

The literature review is like an explorer's map, not shopping list. It is organised in terms of conceptual themes not authors.

The **introductory paragraph** sets boundaries of the literature review and provides an overview of the whole literature review. The remaining paragraphs are organised into sections, sub-sections, with a summary at the end of each major section to emphasise points being made. Avoid organizing by article or author by author.

Structure of a Literature Review

The literature review usually starts broadly and narrows the focus down to your own research.



(Adapted from Study & Learning Centre, RMIT University 2013.)

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CRITICAL REVIEW

A critical review is an **evaluation** of an academic text.

Evaluation is the process of demonstrating an understanding of the text content by analysing its purpose and structure, assessing and making judgements about its appropriateness according to various academic criteria (e.g. validity of evidence, soundness of methodology, etc.)

Analysis of a text involves careful examination of its content, issues, and structure by separating it into component parts and explaining how these parts function and interact.

Critique – preliminary points

- Critique is not necessarily negative – it may be predominantly positive, predominantly negative, or a combination of positive and negative.
- Critique notes and highlights what is new, old, important in the text (you need to be familiar with the literature).
- When you find yourself responding negatively to a text, analyse this response – sometimes texts challenge your perceptions, assumptions, biases, ideological position in a way that is uncomfortable but may lead to intellectual growth, widening or deepening your understanding.
- ‘Ruminate’. That is, put the article aside and think about what you have read. If anything you have read remains unclear, go back to the article to clarify your understanding of it.
- Critique each text on its own merits, but also keep in mind its place in the literature as a whole – and its value to your own research question.
- Use your own words where possible (let your own scholarly voice be heard).
- Use direct quotations only when you want to communicate the author’s unique mode of expression.
- Keep quotations brief (less than three lines).
- Quote briefly from the article and then discuss what you have quoted as part of your critique.

- Make it clear when you are summarising the writer's ideas and when you are using your own ideas.
- Your review should stand on its own (don't assume the reader has read the article in depth).
- Make sure you are writing a critical review and not simply a summary of what the author says.

Critical Review Questions

Some useful questions to ask of a text are:

- Has the author formulated a research question/problem/issue?
- Is the question clearly defined?
- Are the significance and relevance of the question clearly established?

- Could the question be approached more effectively from another perspective?
- What is the author's research orientation?
- What is the implied audience for the text?
- Is adequate explanation of points given?
- Are comments adequately supported?
- Are the research/methodology/samples/tests/conclusions valid?
- Are measurements clear/sufficiently detailed?
- Is more (or less) data needed?
- Are arguments logically sound/interesting/relevant/timely?
- Is more information needed?
- What style/language/examples are used?
- Does the text contribute new knowledge/perspectives/insights or contradict and refute existing views?
- What are the limitations of the text?

More personal perspectives:

- How does the text help me to understand the topic?
- What is there in the text that surprises/excites/inspires me?

- How does this text relate to the specific thesis or question I'm developing?

Language of Critique

- Use formal, non-emotive academic language to indicate your attitude towards a text.
- Remember that most topics are complex - not simple pro-con cases. Language must be rational, balanced.

'Concession' clauses are useful for emphasising your objectivity and fairness :

'Although Brown's study opens up interesting avenues of enquiry, the data sample is too small to adequately support the contention that....'

'Despite these limitations, Tan's paper does made a valuable contribution to the current debate.'

While Black does raise valid points, his argument is fundamentally flawed by his assertion that....'

Expressing negativity

Negative quantifiers:

'Little evidence is offered'

'Few examples are given....'

'No new material is presented....'

Lexical negation:

'Green fails to demonstrate....'

'Brown overlooks....'

'Tan's account lacks...'

'White's argument is inconclusive/misleading/
limited/questionable/unconvincing/etc....'

Negative adjectives: inadequate, unrepresentative, unproven, inappropriate, vague, sparse, imprecise, insufficient, unsatisfactory, selective, incomplete, specious, unsuitable, unsupported, unsubstantiated, inconsistent, incompatible, irrelevant, deficient, flawed, mistaken, unreliable, ambiguous, questionable.

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