Literature Reviews

The literature review is a critical examination of existing research that is significant to your study. Some think it is a summary: not true. Although you need to summarize relevant research, it is vital that you evaluate the literature reviewed, explain relationships between studies, and explain how each study relates to your study. In other words, you cannot simply write a concise description of an article; you need to provide specificity of the research (e.g. the methodology), show how it relates to the other studies (e.g. what other methods have been used? How are they similar? How are they different?), and show how each study’s methods relates to your study (what is its relationship to your research method?).

Remember that the literature review should provide the context for your research by examining what research has been published in your research area. It is not meant to be only a summary of other people’s research.

Literature review has three functions:
1. Provide clarity and focus to your research problem,
2. Improve your methodology, and
3. Broaden your knowledge base in your research area.

You need to know:
1. What other researchers have discovered,
2. What theories have been advanced, and
3. What gaps exist in the body of knowledge.

Steps in the literature review process:
1. Search for existing literature in your area of study,
2. Review the literature selected,
3. Develop a theoretical framework, and/or
4. Develop a conceptual framework.

Where do you search?

Valid Sources:

**Journal articles**: these are good especially for up-to-date information. Bear in mind, though, that it can take up to two years to publish articles. They are frequently used in literature reviews because they offer a relatively concise, up-to-date format for research, and because all reputable journals are refereed (i.e. editors publish only the most relevant and reliable research).

**Conference proceedings**: these can be useful in providing the latest research, or research that has not been published. They are also helpful in providing information on which people are currently involved in which research areas, and so can be helpful in tracking down other work by the same researchers.

**Theses and dissertations**: these can be useful sources of information. However, there are disadvantages: 1) they can be difficult to obtain since they are not published, but are generally only available from the library shelf or through interlibrary loan; 2) the student who carried out the research may not be an experienced researcher and therefore you might have
to treat their findings with more caution than published research. (Digital Dissertations via the library site).

**Government/corporate reports:** many government departments and corporations commission or carry out research. Their published findings can provide a useful source of information, depending on your field of study.

**Books:** books tend to be less up-to-date as it takes longer for a book to be published than for a journal article.

Invalid Sources:

**Newspapers and Magazines:** since mass media is generally intended for a general (not specialized) audience, the information they provide will be of very limited use for your literature review.

**Internet:** the fastest-growing source of information is on the Internet. It is impossible to characterize the information available but here are some hints about using electronic sources: 1) bear in mind that anyone can post information on the Internet so the quality may not be reliable, 2) the information you find may be intended for a general audience and so not be suitable for inclusion in your literature review (information for a general audience is usually less detailed), and 3) more refereed electronic journals (e-journals) are appearing on the Internet - if they are refereed it means that there is an editorial board that evaluates the work before publishing it in their e-journal, so the quality should be more reliable (depending on the reputation of the journal).

Writing the literature review:
1. Use headings to organize themes within the literature,
2. Organize findings under major themes, and
3. Arguments should be conceptually clear, highlight the reasons for and against, and refer to the major research findings, gaps, and issues related to your topic.

Your literature review should answer:
1. What we already know in the immediate area concerned?
2. What are the characteristics of the key concepts or the main factors or variables?
3. What are the relationships between these key concepts, factors or variables?
4. What are the existing theories?
5. Where are the inconsistencies or shortcomings in our knowledge and understanding?
6. What views need to be (further) tested?
7. What evidence is lacking, inconclusive, contradictory, or too limited?
8. Why study (further) the research problem?
9. What contribution can the present study expect to make?
10. What research designs or methods are satisfactory or unsatisfactory?
How do I write a good literature review?

Remember the purpose: Use the literature to explain your research - after all, you are not writing a literature review just to report what other researchers have done. You aim is to show why your research is needed, how you came to choose certain methodologies or theories, how your work adds to the body of knowledge, etc.

Read with a purpose: Summarize the work you read, but also decide which ideas or information are important to your research (so you can emphasize them), and which are less important and can be covered briefly or left out of your review. You should look for the major concepts, conclusions, theories, and arguments that underlie the work, and look for similarities and differences with closely related works.

Write with a purpose: Evaluate and show relationships between works completed and your own work (Is Researcher Y’s theory more convincing than Researcher X’s? Did Researcher X build on the work of Researcher Y?). To do this effectively, plan carefully how to organize your work.

Some people organize their writing chronologically. Unless developments over time are crucial to explain the context of your research problem, using a chronological system will not be an effective way to organize your writing. It is better to organize your writing by the major concepts posed/tested in your study. Craft a storyline that is logical, flows from one idea to another, and presents an understandable outcome, that being an undeniable need for your study.

Traps to Avoid:

Trying to read everything! If you attempt an exhaustive account of everything published, you’ll never finish the reading. The literature review is not to summarize all the published work related to your research, but a survey of the most relevant and significant work.

Reading but not writing! It’s easier to read than to write: given the choice, most of us would rather sit down with a cup of coffee and read instead of putting ourselves in front of the computer to write about what we have already read. However, writing can help you to understand and find relationships between the works you’ve read, so don’t put off writing until you’ve “finished” reading - after all, you will probably still do some reading through the end of your research. Also, don’t think of what you first write as being the final or near-final version. Writing is a way of thinking, so allow yourself to write as many drafts as you need, changing your ideas and information as you learn more about the context of your research problem.

Not keeping bibliographic information! The moment comes when you have to record your references . . . and then you realize you forgot to keep the information needed, and you never got around to putting references in your work. The only solution is to spend a lot of time in the library tracking down all those sources you read, and going through your writing to find which information came from which source. To avoid this nightmare, always keep accurate records of your sources. Always include references in your writing, as you write each draft. ¹

¹ Material adapted from AIT Extension language center