Literature Reviews

The literature review is a critical look at the existing research that is significant to the work that you are carrying out. Some people think that it is a summary: this is not true. Although you need to summarize relevant research, it is also vital that you evaluate this work, show the relationships between different works, and show how it relates to your work. In other words, you cannot simply give a concise description of, for example, an article: you need to select what parts of the research to discuss (e.g. the methodology), show how it relates to the other work (e.g. What other methodologies have been used? How are they similar? How are they different?) and show how it relates to your work (what is its relationship to your methodology?).

Keep in mind that the literature review should provide the context for your research by looking at what work has already been done in your research area. It is not supposed to be just a summary of other people's work!

Literature review has three functions:
1. Bring 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
what other researchers have found
what theories have been put forward
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
4. Develop a conceptual framework

Where do you search?
Abstracts of articles (ERIC)
Citation indices
Electronic databases
E-Journals

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

**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.

**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)

Not so useful 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 and 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**

Utilize headings to organize themes within the literature
Organize findings under major themes
Arguments should be conceptually clear, highlight the reasons for and against, and refer to the major research findings, gaps, and issues relating to your topic.

Your literature review should answer:
1. What do 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 other 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 be expected to make?
10. What research designs or methods seem unsatisfactory?
HOW CAN I WRITE A GOOD LITERATURE REVIEW?

- **Remember the purpose**: it should answer the questions above. You should use the literature to explain your research - after all, you are not writing a literature review just to tell your reader what other researchers have done. You aim should be to show why your research needs to be carried out, how you came to choose certain methodologies or theories to work with, how your work adds to the research already carried out, etc.

- **Read with a purpose**: you need to summarize the work you read but you must 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 also look for the major concepts, conclusions, theories, arguments etc. that underlie the work, and look for similarities and differences with closely related work.

- **Write with a purpose**: your aim should be to evaluate and show relationships between the work already done (Is Researcher Y’s theory more convincing than Researcher X’s? Did Researcher X build on the work of Researcher Y?) and between this work and your own. In order to do this effectively you should carefully plan how you are going to organize your work.

Some people like to organize their work 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 work. Some people choose to organize their work alphabetically by author name: this system will not allow you to show the relationships between the work of different researchers, and your work, and should be avoided!

**TRAPS**

Some traps to avoid:

- **Trying to read everything!** If you try to be comprehensive, you will never be able to finish the reading! The idea of the literature review is not to provide a summary of all the published work that relates 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 yet another article 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 writing off until you've "finished" reading - after all, you will probably still be doing some reading all the way through to the end of your research project. 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 will come when you have to write your references page . . . and then you realize you have forgotten to keep the information you need, and that you never got around to putting references into your work. The only solution is to spend a lot of time in the library tracking down all those sources that you read, and going through your writing to find which information came from which source. If you're lucky, maybe you can actually do this before your defense - more likely, you will unable to find all your sources, a big headache for you and your committee. To avoid this nightmare, always keep this information in your notes. Always put references into your writing. 1

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1 Material adapted from AIT Extension language center