

# WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW

## 1. WHAT IS A LITERATURE REVIEW?

A literature review is an evaluative comparison of various pieces of research. It is not just a set of summaries or a descriptive list of material. It shows the reader what previous research has been done in your field, critiques previous methodology, and evaluates prior studies to show an information gap which your own research will fill. The information which follows is particularly relevant to a thesis literature review, but can be applied to shorter reviews and thesis proposals.

## 2. WHY DO A LITERATURE REVIEW?

There are many reasons why you should write a literature review. Swales and Feak (1994, pp. 180 – 181) suggest the following (using the word 'citation' to mean 'reference to another author'):

1. Citations recognise and acknowledge the intellectual property rights of authors. They are a matter of ethics and a defence against plagiarism. (General theory)
2. Citations are used to show respect to previous scholars. (General theory)
3. Citations operate a kind of mutual reward system. Writers 'pay' other authors in citations. (Ravetz 1971)
4. Citations are tools of persuasion; writers use citations to give their statements greater authority. (Gilbert 1977)
5. Citations are used to demonstrate familiarity with the field. (Bavelas 1978)
6. Citations are used to create a research space. (Swales 1990)

Here are some more reasons for writing a review:

- to avoid making the same mistakes as other people
- to carry on from where others have reached
- to increase your breadth of knowledge in your subject area
- to identify key works, information and needs in your area
- to identify and learn terminology
- to position your own work in context
- to identify opposing views
- to demonstrate that you can access research in the field
- to identify methods relevant to your project
- to identify studies that are worth replicating or improving
- to find experts in your field whom you could contact

(Adapted from Littrell 2003, Roberts & Taylor 2002 and LSU RMIT 2004.)



**Source**

Was the piece of writing recommended by another researcher?

Yes	No

(Based on Monash University 1994-2004)

**4. HOW SHOULD I DO A LITERATURE REVIEW?**

(The following information is adapted from Central Queensland University Library 2000.)

**STAGES**

4.1 Select the topic

4.2 Set the topic in context

4.3 Search for information sources

- Define the information need you have, and state it as a question.  
eg *What do I want to know about . . . ?*
- Break the need into its component parts. Identify concepts, keywords and synonyms.
- Select an information source that matches your information need.

4.4 Evaluate your information sources

- Evaluate the information. Read the abstract. Note everything which *may* be important.
- Evaluate the search process. Have you got too little information? Maybe you need to broaden the scope of your search, try different types of sources or explore other disciplines. Have you got too much information? Narrow your search. Look for key words and authors. Define your question more.

**THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN EVALUATING A REFERENCE**

**Content**

- Good arguments
- Shows evidence for claims
- Reliable
- Shows limitations
- Biased
- Strong content
- Weak content

Yes	No

**Context in discipline**

- Landmark article
- Useful contribution to field
- Agrees with current thought
- Contradicts current thought
- Good introduction to field


		Yes	No
<b>Methodology</b>	Strong reasoning		
	Replication possible		
	Adequate sample size		
<b>Author</b>	Good academic standing		
	Refers to other authors		
	Writing easy to understand		
<b>Relevance</b>	Recent publication		
	Reliable source		
	Same purpose as your own research		
	Relevant to your study		
	Country where research was conducted relates to your own research		

#### 4.5 Extract the information from your sources

- Making a summary table will help you to see common threads in your literature. Roberts and Taylor (2002) give the following headings as an example:

Author	Type of study	Sample	Design	Data collection approach	Key findings
	eg quantitative				
	eg qualitative				

You could also include headings such as 'type of work', 'source of material', 'problems' or 'relevance to my study'.

- Keep a list of all items ordered via document delivery, so that you don't order the same item twice.

#### 4.6 Organise the information

- Keep careful notes about the source of the information. Use the reference system you intend to use for your thesis. You may want to use the computer program 'Endnote', if you have access to it.

There are different ways to **group** your literature in the review. Here are some suggestions:

- Group related studies together.
- Review briefly any weaker studies or studies that share similar methods. Devote more attention to groundbreaking, stronger studies.
- Organise studies by findings.
- Organise by methodology.
- Organise by theory.

Imagine you have to write about the six reasons for writing a literature review given on page 1. How would you group them? What reasons can you give for this grouping? There are many possibilities.

Swales and Feak (1994, p. 182) group the theories from page 1 of the handout in the following way:

<b>Theory 1</b>
Theory 2

Established major theories

Rhetorical	Theories 4 and 6
Economic	Theory 3
Sociological	Theory 5

Theories associated with individual authors

#### 4.7 Position the literature review in your discipline

- How does it match previous research?
- Where does it fit in your discipline?

#### 4.8 Write the literature review

- *“Help. There is no literature to review!”* Show the gaps in the current literature. Review literature which justifies your choice of topic. Search other people's bibliographies for ideas, or join an email discussion list.
- *“When should I write it?”* Before the rest of your thesis, to identify the gaps and focus your own thoughts.
- *“Can I use I/we?”* Check with your department.
- Active/passive – too much passive is boring.
- Tenses – use present tense to describe general principles or results (“These results indicate that . . .”); past tense to describe past findings (Smith’s 1999 study found that . . .).
- Format and length – could be one or two chapters, or integrated in other chapters.
- Position in thesis – usually after the introduction; literature reviews for science subjects may be part of the introduction, identifying work previously done in the field.
- Headings – usage depends on your department.
- Authority – develop a theme and use the work of relevant authors to support your argument; paraphrase rather than quote, if you can.
- Layout – introduction, body and conclusion.

## 5. CAN YOU SHOW ME AN EXAMPLE OF A LITERATURE REVIEW?

Ask your supervisor or lecturer, or look in the Special Collections area in the library (try asking your supervisor for some recommendations). Here are a few suggestions from the Central Library:

### **Science**

Zeegers, P] 1992, Aromatic substitution reactions, PhD thesis, Flinders University of South Australia. [3 separate sections, each with a literature review in the introductory paragraphs.]

### **Social sciences**

Tilt, CA 1998, An exploration of Australian corporate environmental policies, PhD thesis, Flinders University of South Australia. [Literature is reviewed in chapters two and three.]

### **Languages**

Miller, J 2001, An investigation into the use of anglicisms in European Portuguese, 1974 – 2000, MA thesis, Flinders University of South Australia. [Literature is reviewed in chapters one and two.]

## 6. WHAT DO DIFFERENT DEPARTMENTS EXPECT IN A RESEARCH HIGHER DEGREE LITERATURE REVIEW?

### **Archaeology**

A literature review is required, but it may not be called “Chapter x – literature review”.

### **Australian Studies**

Inclusion of a separate literature review depends on the collaborating discipline (social sciences or humanities)

### **Cultural Tourism**

There is no standardised format. It could be a separate chapter or it could be incorporated at a suitable place in the thesis.

### **Education**

APA referencing is used. See Anderson and Poole 2001, Assignment and Thesis Writing.

### **Geography**

A literature review chapter would be required in just about all geography theses.

### **History**

A literature review is integral to postgraduate work. It does not necessarily require a separate chapter, but it needs to be built in to the thesis and addressed in the research proposal.

### **Humanities (general)**

No formal literature review is required for many humanities subjects, but you may need to write an annotated bibliography for your research proposal.

### **Labour Studies**

A review would be expected in all MAs and PhDs. It could be a separate chapter, or might be embedded in the early part of the thesis.

### **Law**

No formal literature review is required, but you should show you are familiar with present knowledge, so that you can then make an original contribution to it.

### **Medical Biotechnology**

The literature review comes in the introduction and describes information or research relevant to the thesis research or experiment.

**Nursing** students will find an excellent chapter on literature reviews in Roberts, KL & Taylor, BJ 2002, *Nursing research processes: an Australian perspective*, Nelson, South Melbourne.

### **Public Policy**

For coursework Masters students, a separate 6000 word research paper is required, which is actually a literature review. Literature should be divided by theme. A larger thesis would have divisions such as introduction, methodology, and a discussion of literature by theme.

### **Theology**

It is unusual to include a formal review, but you should demonstrate throughout the thesis that you are familiar with all relevant literature.

## **7. WHAT DO THE EXAMINERS LOOK FOR?**

Examiners want to see that you can:

- ✓ set up a theoretical framework for your research, with the goals clearly set out in the introduction and summarised in the conclusion
- ✓ show your reader that you have a clear understanding of the key concepts/ideas/studies/ models related to your topic
- ✓ talk about the history of your research area and any related controversies
- ✓ discuss these ideas in a context appropriate for your own investigation
- ✓ evaluate the work of others
- ✓ clarify important definitions and terminology
- ✓ develop the research space you will also indicate in the introduction and abstract
- ✓ narrow the problem down; make the study feasible
- ✓ structure the review, using headings as appropriate
- ✓ use good expression and punctuation
- ✓ use your referencing system correctly
- ✓ use current literature as well as older sources
- ✓ identify the range of resources you have used
- ✓ write in an interesting way

(Adapted from Clerehan 1999, p. 2 and Bruce 2002.)

## 8. WHAT CRITICISMS DO EXAMINERS MAKE?

According to Afolabi (1992, cited in Bruce 2002) and Hansford and Maxwell (1993, cited in Bruce 2002), literature reviews are often criticised because:

### Criticism

Landmark studies are not included

Outdated material is given too prominent a place

Recent literature is not included

The perspective is not wide enough

The review is not sufficiently analytical

The writer has not discriminated between relevant and irrelevant material

There is no coherence

The literature is not related to the research question or hypotheses

Sources are not correctly interpreted

Have I avoided this?

## 9. QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT YOUR OWN LITERATURE REVIEW

*What are the keywords for your topic/thesis?*

*What sources will you use?*

*Who are the major authors in your area?*

*Who are the minor authors?*

*What information gap are you trying to fill?*

*How will you divide the literature? By ideas, methodology, chronology, major/minor authors, or another arrangement?*

*What are the goals of your review?*

*What literature will you include?*

*What is your perspective on the literature?*

*What will your review focus on?*

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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