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THE STRATEGIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Introduction – What is a Literature Review?

The literature review is one part of an academic research paper albeit an important part. The focus of a literature review, however, is to summarize and synthesize the arguments and ideas of others without adding new contributions. A good literature review provides a foundation for and supports your contributions and insights to a research paper. A *good* literature review does more than just provide a simple summary of sources; it has a conceptually-based organizational theme and combines both a brief summary and synthesis of the literature reviewed. A summary presents a recap of all important information from the source, and a synthesis blends the information into a meaningful whole. A synthesis could offer a new interpretation of old material, join new with old interpretations, or sketch the intellectual progression of the field, including major or original debates. Depending on the research introduced, the literature review may provide an evaluation of the sources and advise the reader on where the current research adds to or resolves current debates.

What a Literature Review is NOT

Reviewing the literature does not refer to summarizing great literary texts. Nor does it mean that the writer discusses his/her personal opinion about whether s/he liked the articles reviewed. Finally, a literature review is NOT an article by article summary of material found. That is called an annotated bibliography.

Why Write a Literature Review

Good quality literature reviews will give an overview of the research in the field and act as a stepping stone linking your research with existing studies in the field. They are useful reports that show the author is up to date with what is current on the topic as well has a solid understanding of the classics in the area. The depth and breadth of the literature review emphasizes the credibility of the writer in his/her subject. Comprehensive knowledge of the literature on the research topic is essential to quality research articles.

Getting Started

Typically one should include the most recent research on the topic as well as any classics which have been part of an ongoing debate. Look for other literature reviews in your area of interest or in your discipline and use those to get a sense of the types of themes you might want to develop in your own research or to help organize your final review. Keep your topic in mind. Resist the temptation to follow up research that seems interesting for its own sake. The reference section of sources you have already read are typically excellent sources on your topic. There are hundreds or even thousands of articles and books on most research topics, so you will make your job easier if you limit your scope.

Consider what themes or issues connect your sources. Do the sources present one or different solutions to a similar problem? Is there a facet of the research that is missing? How well do the sources you read present the material and do they ground it in an appropriate theory? Do they reveal a trend in the field or expose a raging debate? Pick one of these themes to narrow your focus and organize your review. Then write a thesis statement telling your readers what to expect in the paper. This will help keep your literature search more narrow and focused.

How much is enough?

There are no specific rules about how many references are required for a good literature review. In most instances, this will depend on the nature of your research and the size of the existing literature. Controversial, widely-debated topics require more sources. If a particular topic is relatively obscure and has not attracted much attention, your list of sources might be smaller than you expected.

Begin Writing

Use evidence. A literature review is similar to any other academic research paper. Your interpretation of the available sources must be backed up with evidence to show that what you are saying is accurate.

Be selective. Highlight only the most important points in each source you use, remember you are not writing an article by article summary. The type of information you choose to mention should relate directly to your focus.

Use quotes sparingly. The brief summary/synthesis format of the literature review does not allow for in-depth discussion or detailed quotes from the text. A few short quotes here and there are okay if you want to emphasize a point. Terms created by the author(s), not common knowledge, or taken directly from a particular study are also placed in quotes.

Remember these are your ideas and words. While the literature review presents others' ideas, the sources are used to support your research. You are interpreting what the authors of the sources wrote.

Use caution when paraphrasing. When paraphrasing a source that is not your own, be sure to represent the author's information or opinions accurately in your own words and cite the source appropriately. For more information, please see our handout on plagiarism.

Revise, revise, revise

After completing your first draft, prepare to revise. As you re-read what you have written, remember your main objective is to present the findings, not the argument which led to them. Pay attention to your language so that you've written the information in the most concise manner possible, used terminology familiar to your audience, and eliminated unnecessary jargon or slang. Check that you have used proper grammar, documented your sources and formatted the review appropriately for your discipline. Use grammar and spell check programs on your final draft and let someone you trust read what you have written and provide a thorough critique.

Resources

- Anson, C. M. and Schwegler, R. A. 2000. *The Longman handbook for writers and readers*, 2nd ed. New York: Longman.
- Elphinstone, L. & Schweitzer, R. 1988 *How to get a research degree: A survival guide*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards.
- Hart, C. 1999 *Doing a literature review: Releasing the social science research imagination*, London, England, Sage.
- Jones, Bizzaro, P. & Selfe, C. 1997. *The Harcourt Brace guide to writing in the disciplines*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Lamb, S. E. 1998. *How to write it: A complete guide to everything you'll ever write*. Berkeley, Calif.: Ten Speed Press.
- Rosen, Leonard J. and Laurence Behrens. *The Allyn and Bacon Handbook*. 4th ed., Boston, Allyn and Bacon, 2000.
- Troyka, L. Q. 2002. *Simon and Schuster handbook for writers*. Upper Saddle River, NJ, Prentice Hall.

Web Resources

<http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/specific-types-of-writing/literature-review>

<http://www.rmit.edu.au/browse;ID=cdb4z3x5a44k>

http://web.pdx.edu/~bertini/courses/literature_review.htm

http://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/lsu/content/2_AssessmentTasks/assess_tuts/lit_review_LL/conclusion.html

<http://dissertationblog.com/thesis/how-to-write-literature-review-%e2%80%93-something-for-beginners/>

<http://www.une.edu.au/library/eskillsplus/literature/litreview.php>

http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/literature_review.html

<http://dissertationblog.com/thesis/how-to-write-literature-review/>

<http://www.gwu.edu/~litrev/>

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