

Literature Review

A literature review is an organised write up showing **previous work done concerning a research topic or question in your field**. The aim of a literature review is to show your reader (e.g. your supervisor) that you have read and that you have a good grasp of the main published work concerning a particular topic or question in your field. This work may be in any format, including online sources. It may be a separate assignment, or one of the introductory sections of a report, dissertation or thesis. In the latter cases in particular, the review will be guided by your research objective or by the issue or thesis you are arguing and will provide the framework for your further work.

It is very important to note that your review should not be simply a description of what others have published in the form of a set of summaries, but should take the form of a critical discussion, showing insight and an awareness of differing arguments, theories and approaches. It should be a synthesis and analysis of the relevant published work, linked at all times to your own purpose and rationale.

A good literature review, therefore, is critical of what has been written, identifies areas of controversy, raises questions and identifies areas which need further research. According to Caulley (1992) of La Trobe University, the literature review should do the following:

- ❖ compare and contrast different authors' views on an issue
- ❖ group authors who draw similar conclusions
- ❖ criticise aspects of methodology
- ❖ note areas in which authors are in disagreement
- ❖ highlight exemplary studies
- ❖ highlight gaps in research
- ❖ show how your study relates to previous studies
- ❖ show how your study relates to the literature in general
- ❖ conclude by summarising what the literature says

The general purposes of the review are to:

- ❖ help you define and limit the problem you are working on
- ❖ help you place your study in a historical perspective
- ❖ help you avoid unnecessary duplication
- ❖ help you evaluate promising research methods
- ❖ help you relate your findings to previous knowledge and suggest further research

If you make a good literature review you will have the following advantages:

1. It shows that you do not only understand what you have done, but you understand what others have done related to your subject in a broader context. Several researchers have already done lots of work on your subject. If you can tell people about what research has already been done and what methods already exist, then your readers will think that at least you are interested in your topic, have some self-initiative and are informed and up-to-date on your research area.

2. It shows that you are intelligent enough to evaluate the quality of the other research work done on the subject, i.e., it shows that you are capable of thinking critically and identifying strengths and weakness.

3. It gives you the opportunity to tell how your research is related to previous work done by others on the subject.

4. It tells the reader if you are simply going to duplicate others' work simply to gain a better understanding, or whether your focus is to improve upon others' work or perhaps combine the methodology of two or more existing approaches to solving a problem.

Tips for Writing a Literature Survey

1. **BE A HUNTER!** Go online and search for articles, books and papers related to your subject. Be creative and persistent in your keyword search until you hunt down good references or examples. It is important, therefore, to try and decide on the parameters of your research. What exactly are your objectives and what do you need to find out? In your review, are you looking at issues of theory, methodology, policy, quantitative research, or what? Before you start reading it may be useful to compile a list of the main areas and questions involved, and then read with the purpose of finding out about or answering these. Unless something comes up which is particularly important, stick to this list, as it is very easy to get side-tracked, particularly on the internet.