

# Succeeding with Your Literature Review

**A handbook for students**

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# 1

## The nature and purpose of a literature review

*Summary • Learning outcomes • The nature of a literature review • Identifying the main subject and themes • Reviewing previous research • Emphasizing leading research studies • Exploring trends in the literature • Summarizing key ideas in a subject area • Key terms • Key questions • Key reading*

### **Summary**

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A literature review is usually regarded as being an essential part of student projects, research studies and dissertations. This chapter examines the reasons for the importance of the literature review, and the things which it tries to achieve. It also explores the main strategies which you can use to write a good literature review.

### **Learning outcomes**

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After reading this chapter you should be able to do the following:

- Understand the nature of a literature review.
- Summarize the reasons why a literature review is regarded as being so important in projects and dissertations.

- List and understand the main ways in which you can go about reviewing a body of literature.

## **The nature of a literature review**

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Just about every student has at one time or another had to write a literature review! However, despite the fact that it is almost obligatory in research studies and dissertations, there is often not the time on busy courses for tutors to devote all the time to it that the subject deserves. The aim of this book is therefore to address this problem, and to look systematically at the reasons for writing a literature review, and how to go about doing it. Generally speaking, the longer the piece of work you are doing, then the more crucial becomes the review of literature. You will need to find and write about more examples of previous research, and the overall job becomes quite a major undertaking. This book will provide you with a step-by-step logical approach to the process, which should make it both easier and more interesting.

What then is a literature review? Well, when you are researching a topic, it usually has to be fairly narrow and focused, and because of this it can be difficult to appreciate how your research subject is connected to other related areas. The overall purpose of a literature review is to demonstrate this, and to help the reader to understand how your study fits into a broader context. For example, you might be carrying out an interview study of a small group of young people, to explore the difficulties they have in becoming established in a career. They will probably talk about a wide range of issues, many of which are personal or specific to them. However, when you come to write up your data as a dissertation, you will inevitably want to draw broader conclusions, and to apply your data to other related situations. You will also want to demonstrate that the question of finding a job or career for young people does not depend solely upon the young person themselves. There are wider factors in society which can affect their success or failure.

This is where the literature review becomes important. Whether or not a young person can find a suitable career definitely depends partly on the qualities and aptitudes of the individual person. However, it also depends upon the broad state of the economy; on government strategies to help young people into employment; on the current level of success of certain industries and sectors of employment, and on the availability of training and further and higher education. As part of your literature review you would survey what has been written and researched on these broad areas and their connection with careers and employment of young people. Having established the scope of existing research you would be able to show how your dissertation fits into the previous sequence of studies. You would be better able to make out a case that your study adds something to what is known

about this matter. A literature review enables us to see how new studies and research are rather like building blocks, which are laid upon the ideas built by others.

A literature review therefore helps us to appreciate something of the sequence and growth of knowledge. As we survey the previous research on a subject, we may be able to identify areas which have not yet been investigated. These might suggest topics for future research projects, and also might suggest a particular focus or train of thought for our present dissertation. We thus can begin to think of knowledge as slowly accumulating in the past, and of research adding to this well into the future.

As you investigate what has been researched and previously written on a topic, you implicitly begin to justify the choice of subject for your own research. If a good many researchers have investigated different aspects of a particular topic in the past, then it is reasonable to assume it is an important topic. You might think, however, that there is a danger of repeating research, and hence making it very difficult to add to knowledge. This is not a problem which is likely to happen too often in the social sciences. For example, suppose that you are investigating the attitudes of a sample of 14-year-old school pupils to the issue of gender equality in society. You complete your interviews with the pupils, only to discover that a very similar piece of research was conducted two years ago in a school in a different part of the country. You are immediately worried that your research is not sufficiently original, and cannot possibly reveal anything new about the issue. Essentially, you need not worry.

The context of the first piece of research will have been very different. The school was different, and was located in a different catchment area in a different part of the country. The sample of pupils was certainly different. Besides the difference in the actual individuals, there may have been differences in the composition of the sample in terms of gender and ethnicity. The pupils will also have been taught by different teachers, and could be said to have had different educational experiences. We could go on listing such differences, but can sum this up by suggesting that there are so many different social variables between the two pieces of research, that there is little danger that the research will have been identical. In fact, sometimes this repetition of the theme of research is very useful in the social sciences, as it can reveal fresh nuances about a particular topic.

In a research study published in 2010, Shah, Dwyer and Modood examined some of the potential connections between educational achievement, social class and ethnicity. In the past there has been a good deal of research which has examined different contexts and permutations of the interaction between these variables. It is a contentious and problematic area, and no doubt there will be many further studies of various kinds which will examine the subject. It is an area in which there is a multiplicity of relevant literature, and yet the very complexity of the issues involved makes it relatively unlikely that any future studies could be seen as duplicating previous research.

## Identifying the main subject and themes

By the time you start your literature review, you will probably have decided upon the main theme for your investigation, and also upon the key research objectives. To some extent therefore the essential task has been predetermined. You may have selected a research topic or theme around which a great deal of research has been previously conducted. If that is the case, it should not be difficult to find writing and research to review. In fact, the main difficulty may be in selecting what you want to include, and what you wish to exclude. However, if you have selected a fairly esoteric subject on which little has been written, then it may be difficult to find sufficient material to review. You may have to consider including a discussion of material which only exists on the periphery of the subject chosen.

There is every reason, therefore, when planning a research study or dissertation, that as many aspects of the research as possible are taken into account at the beginning.

### Good practice



Research should not be treated as if it is a rigidly sequential process. In fact we often tend to present it like that in books, but it is not really an accurate picture. We can tend to think that we should select a research topic, then write the literature review, and then consider the kind of methodology to use. In fact, it is much more sensible to reflect upon all of these issues simultaneously during the planning and design phase of the research. Hence, before you finally decide on a research topic, it is best to conduct a quick survey of the available literature.

Are you happy with the range of literature which is available for this particular topic?

Does your chosen topic appear to fit in to a sequence of previous research studies?

In other words, decisions on research design are rarely taken in isolation, but should be seen as part of the overall research plan.

Suppose, for example, that you select the subject of business ethics for your research, and in particular wish to investigate the way in which products and raw materials are sourced from developing countries. It is difficult to decide on this subject with any certainty, without simultaneously taking into account