The Literature Review

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The literature review: a framework for your study

- Establish the context and significance of your topic/research
- Benchmark for comparing the results with other findings
- Discover important variables relevant to the topic
- Synthesize and gain a new perspective
- Identify relationships between ideas and practice
- Enhance and acquire the subject vocabulary
- Understand the structure of the subject
- Relate ideas and theory to applications
- Identify the main methodologies and research techniques
- Place the research in a historical context and show familiarity with up-to-date developments.
Stages to a literature review

- Formulation of research questions
- Development of study protocol
- Identification of relevant literature
- Determining inclusion & exclusion criteria
- Selection of studies from literature
- Study quality assessment
- Data extraction from selected studies
- Data synthesis and summary of results
- Interpretation of results
- Writing of systematic review

ASEA 2009, Sulayman & Mendes, 2009, pp1-8
According to Wisker (2008):

- The literature review is a misnomer for many-it sounds as though it is a review or summary.

- In fact it is the place where students start to engage in critical dialogue with other researchers and experts in their field.
My Literature Review - Don’t

i. Introduction
ii. Article 1
iii. Article 2
iv. Book Chapter 1
v. Article 3
vi. Article 4
vii. Summary & Conclusions
My Literature Review - Do

- Concept 1
  - Outcome 1
    - References 1 to 5
  - Outcome 2
    - References 6, 7
- Concept 2
- Concept 3
  - Outcome 3
    - References 8 to 12
Literature Map Example on:
Employees’ concerns about the fairness of and the making of managerial decisions

(from Janovec, 2001 cited in Creswell, 2003, p 40)
Wisker (2008) encourages you to ask:

- Who are YOUR main theorists?
- Who are you reading in relation to theory and to method?
- What are the debates in these areas?
- And how does YOUR work engage in a dialogue with these debates?
Wisker’s (2008) modelling activity

Read example essays and articles which use a wide variety of literature.

- How do they use the literature?
- Is it a dead list? Is it merely summarised?
- Is there any organisation into themes?
- What are the issues, or developments, or contradictions or arguments in the field?
Finding material

Where to look? How to look?

- Consider the scope of the topic

- Assess your own methods of searching.
  - Consistently revise your search terms or search vocabulary
  - Do you need to develop in a particular area? Contact your subject librarian
Reading and evaluating material

Reading strategies

- **Scan** the abstract or contents page and index.
- **Skim** through relevant sections to gauge how useful it is likely to be.
- **Speed read**: look for the topic sentences of paragraphs and main nouns.
Reading strategies cont…..

Read actively:
- look for good definitions, examples, and arguments
- read to identify conflicts or problems
- read to look at writing styles
- read to compare and contrast between authors
- check what you read against your own hypotheses
- keep your own research questions in mind.
Evaluating the material

Ask yourself:

- Is the problem clearly articulated?
- Are the results new?
- Was the research influential?
- How large a sample was used?
- How convincing is the argument?
- How were the results analysed?
Evaluating the material cont......

- What perspective are they coming from?
- Are the generalisations justified by the evidence?
- What is the significance of this research?
- What are the assumptions behind the research?
  - Is the methodology well justified?
- Is the theoretical basis transparent?
Grix (2001) identifies three stages in the process:

- The initial overview of the field, or “initial dip”
- A narrowing focus, in tandem with the development of your research topic
- The “full scale critical literature review”
Steps in Conducting a Literature Review


- Identify key words from topic or preliminary readings
- Search library holdings (books, review articles, subject databases)
- Locate initially 50 reports and skim for relevance
  - journal articles
  - book chapters
- Design a literature map
  - visual picture of literature groupings on your topic
- Draft summaries of most relevant articles for proposal
- Assemble literature review
  - thematic structure
  - Concepts
  - concluding chapter on how your study adds to new insights/knowledge
The main aims of a literature review in a proposal (Hart, 1998):

- to indicate the “history of the topic” and to identify “landmark studies”
- to indicate how your proposed methodology / theoretical framework is adopted in response to existing paradigms
- define key terms or concepts
- to show the contribution that your research will make
Options include:

- *The discrete section or chapter*

- *The literature review and the introduction*

- *The ‘hidden’ literature review woven throughout the thesis*
Internal structure of a literature review

Options include:

- Chronologically (or in historical sequence)
- Methodologically or according to paradigms
- Conceptually or thematically
- According to relevance to your topic
- A combination of the above
Continued……

- Is it vague? Too broad? Too narrow? Disorganised? Leading too widely?
- Do they summarise *to add to debates*?
- Do the texts read and written about here *engage* with the arguments developed by the author?
- Is the discussion of the literature working at a summarising level or a conceptual level?
- Is it properly referenced? And does it use quotation and extract appropriately?
Style of writing the literature review

Points to consider when writing:

- Will you write in a style in which the author is prominent or information / issue is prominent?
- Consider your use of tenses
- Choose other verbs that mean “says”!

Check out the Academic Phrase Bank at Manchester University [http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/](http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/)
In brief a literature review should:

- Cover *current* literature as well as material of an *historical* interest
- Discuss landmark studies and central debates; identify key concepts
- Be critical and evaluative by showing the merits and limitations of existing scholarship
- Have synthesis and an overall coherence
- Relate the review of literature to research questions