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Ask MR CAPTAIN

What is a Review of the Literature?

A literature review is an account of what has been published on a topic by accredited scholars and researchers. Occasionally you will be asked to write one as a separate assignment (sometimes in the form of an annotated bibliography--see the bottom of the next page), but more often it is part of the introduction to an essay, research report, or thesis. In writing the literature review, your purpose is to convey to your reader what knowledge and ideas have been established on a topic, and what their strengths and weaknesses are. As a piece of writing, the literature review must be defined by a guiding concept (e.g., your research objective, the problem or issue you are discussing or your argumentative thesis). It is not just a descriptive list of the material available, or a set of summaries. *You need to show how your research fits into current research and addresses any gaps in your field/area. You want to point out how you are addressing problems found in previous literature.*

Besides enlarging your knowledge about the topic, writing a literature review lets you gain and demonstrate skills in two areas:

Information Seeking: the ability to scan the literature efficiently, using manual or computerized methods, to identify a set of useful articles and books. Critical Appraisal: the ability to apply principles of analysis to identify unbiased and valid studies. A literature review must do these things:

1. Be organized around and related directly to the thesis or research question you are developing
2. Synthesize results into a summary of what is and is not known
3. Identify areas of controversy in the literature
4. Formulate questions that need further research

The literature review should elaborate the research problem in relation to existing relevant literature. This section should indicate the researcher's knowledge of the research problem, the ability to critically evaluate relevant literature and also to integrate & synthesize existing literature. Subheadings should be used to bring about consistency and coherence in literature review if necessary.

Styles of writing

There are many different ways of looking at academic writing styles and one way is to try and identify which of the following styles you are using. All styles have their place

but you need to be wary of spending too much time in your dissertation on the first two.

Chronological writing

This style of writing looks at events over a period of time and relates them chronologically or in date order. Thus, historical texts would follow this style. Often students want to give the historical background to their research area and this is often appropriate. However, be careful not to overdo this. If your research question relates to the 'here and now' (and most do), then it is not appropriate or relevant to have three-quarters of your literature review giving the historical background. It may be appropriate for you to read it so that you understand the context of your study, but it is usually appropriate to confine yourself to a brief summary of the key points, or use this material in the introductory chapter to the dissertation.

An example of this would be a student who wanted to research into whether the media treats women and men athletes the same in terms of sports reporting. There is a vast amount of literature on the historical inequalities in sport which make fascinating reading and could perhaps be mentioned. However, this student would be much better advised to concentrate the bulk of their literature on athletics, sports coverage in the media, gender bias in media, and content analysis of gender bias.

Descriptive writing

It is likely that your literature review will contain descriptive writing which is appropriate for outlining characteristics, models, theories and diagrams, etc. However, beware of this style! If all your writing is descriptive then you will not show that you have the ability to critically review the literature and, therefore, you need to include some of the following styles.

Cause and effect writing

Here you identify the link between one activity and another or one variable and another. What happened? Why did something happen? What were the consequences? This may be an appropriate style of writing in your literature review and is also useful for writing up your findings.

Compare and contrast writing (theme-by-theme)

Here you take two or more concepts or ideas and compare them (looking for similarities) and contrast them (looking for differences). This often occurs in an essay where you may be specifically asked to do this. In a literature review, you may have identified a number of models or theories and want to compare and contrast them in order to develop a rationale for which one to use as the basis for your dissertation, or to help you construct a model on the best or most appropriate aspects of each.

Summarizing writing

Sometimes you are asked to summarize something for a piece of work, but this style is particularly appropriate for making notes on key topics, summarizing the key points. When doing this, think about why you wish to include this idea and how it fits in with

your overall dissertation. You may need to summarize the key points of someone else's work in your dissertation. Summaries are often descriptive.

Analytical writing

Analysis means breaking things down into their constituent parts. For example, if you were to analyze milk you would find, in simple terms that it consisted of a large amount of water, protein, sugar and various minerals and vitamins. In academic writing this means you have to 'unpick' or 'tease out' a concept in order to answer questions such as:

Evaluative writing

In order to evaluate, you have to make a judgment or put a 'value' on something. Is it 'good' or 'appropriate for the purpose', or 'inadequate' or 'lacking evidence', or 'useful' and so on? To do this, almost certainly you will first have analyzed the data in order to make your judgment. Analysis and evaluation go hand-in-hand. You then have to go one step further and say why something is 'useful', or whatever, and give reasons for your judgment.

It is quite likely that your dissertation will contain most, if not all, of the above styles of writing. They apply not only to writing up the literature but to all sections of your work. There is also some overlap between them. For example, chronological writing could also encompass any of the other styles although it is often used descriptively - first this happened, then that happened. Your tutors will be looking for you to use a range of writing skills in your dissertation as appropriate, but make sure that you minimize the descriptive writing and try to develop the other styles.

Language and writing

Note some key points about language:

1. Keep it simple and clear.
2. Do not use a long word when a short one will do.
3. Try to have an average sentence length of 15-20 words; long sentences are hard to follow.
4. Always use the 'third person'. Do not use words such as 'I', 'me', 'my'. For example, write, 'It could be considered that', and not, 'I think that'. ***Ask Dr. Kayombo about this; most quantitative research is written in third person; however, writing in active voice is important. Active voice excludes 'be' verbs and the order of writing is subject then verb.***
 - a. ***Wrong:*** *It could be considered weak if a thesis is not written in active voice.*
 - b. ***Correct:*** *The professor considers writing in passive voice weak.*

5. Check spelling and grammar; if this is a weak area then improve by asking for feedback from your tutor; reading texts on grammar, punctuation and spelling, etc.
6. Try to write in a way that will be interesting to read. Your tutors have a lot of dissertations to mark and one that is interesting and enjoyable to read will be memorable.
7. You need to show that in addition to describing something you can interpret, apply, evaluate and reach conclusions. Some useful words and phrases are given below to help you identify when you are doing what!

How to write a Literature Review:

There are several ways of presenting the ideas of others within the body of the paper. For Example; If you are referring the major influencing factors in the Sheth's model of Industrial Buying Behaviour, it can be written as,

Sheth (1973, p-50) has suggested that, there are a number of influencing factors According to Sheth (1973) model of industrial buying behaviour, there are a number of influencing factors.....

In some models of industrial buying behaviour, there are a number of influencing factors (Sheth, 1973).

In some models of industrial buying behaviour, there are a number of influencing factors¹.

1. Sheth J.N (1973), A Model of Industrial Buying Behaviour, Journal of Marketing, 37(4), 50-56.

A good literature review, you need to do the following:-

Read a lot.

Sounds simplistic, but the fact is that you do have to read a lot, and read with care and purpose. There are things that you can do within the process to make your life easier, and the purpose of this short document is to point some of them out. Hopefully, this will help. However, there is no substitute for good, thorough, and hard work

Writing it up

When writing a literature review, keep in mind that you are reviewing the literature, not summarizing it. For example, if Smith (1978) conducted a study which found that squirrels preferred pecans to acorns, you want to say something like the following:

Smith (1978) found that squirrels preferred pecans to acorns.

You do not want to do this:

Smith (1978) conducted a 3x3x3 factorial design to study squirrels. He concentrated on brown squirrels, stating “flying squirrels are just too damn unpredictable to study” (page 54). 1000 squirrels were broken into six groups and given the choice of nuts to eat. 1 group was given nothing but pecans, the other nothing but acorns, and then allowed to switch, BLAH, BLAH, BLAH, BLAH.....

The point is that in reviewing literature, you do not have to summarize it. If I want to read it, I will. There are exceptions. If you are proving a particular study, or disproving a particular study, then you would want to give more information on the study than the outcomes and the author with citation. But what you are trying to do is prove a point, and you are trying to write well and cogently within the confines of APA format. Use the literature as examples to make your point.

Additionally, if you are citing a bunch of people who say the same thing, summarize the basics of their point and cite them in string. For example:

While Smith (1978) says that squirrels prefer pecans to acorns, his theory was questioned and disproved by a number of people who found that there was no significant difference for nut preference among squirrels (Amos, 1979; Barry, 1980; Catzenjammer, 1980, Douglas, 1980; Zimmerman, 1983).

For some areas of study, there are a large number of people doing studies on the topic. For example, the literature is full of studies of learner control. Some studies say that more learner control is better, some say that less learner control is better. You can report that through a narrative, but a chart indicating the authors of the studies, the findings of the studies, and where the authors fall in all of this could be helpful as well:

Diagram one

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Type of study</i>	<i>Findings</i>	<i>Problems with the study</i>
Jones, 1999	2-tailed t-Test	NSD	Killed the control group.
Ullmer, 2001	Case Study	Users are more likely to like more learner control if they are bribed.	Author convicted of subject bribing.
Williams, 1998	3x3x3 Factorial design	Preference for less learner control.	Small sample size (n=2)

Literature reviews don't have to necessarily be long, they just have to be complete. Anything that you can do to help your reader process this information, and possibly cut down on your own narratives will be appreciated by your reader.

Closing Thoughts

Unfortunately, I don't have any real references for you to read in how to write a literature review. The most common mistakes people make are that they don't do enough literature, or they do too much literature, or they summarize the literature rather than review it. Remember that you are trying to set the stage for your own work, and that outside of the dissertation; you will never have more than about 2 pages in which to do it.

What to Critique-Oral/Written In Literature Review

Here are 6 issues that should be considered when critiquing others work.

- 1. Clear goals.** Does the scholar state the basic purpose of his or her work clearly? Does the scholar define objectives that are realistic and achievable? Does the scholar identify important questions in the field?
- 2. Adequate Preparation.** Does the scholar show an understanding of existing scholarship in the field? Does the scholar bring the necessary skills to his or her work? Does the scholar bring together the resources necessary to move the project forward?
- 3. Appropriate methods.** Does the scholar use methods appropriate to the goals? Does the scholar apply effectively the methods selected? Does the scholar modify procedures in response to changing circumstances?
- 4. Significant Results.** Does the scholar achieve the goals? Does the scholar's work add consequentially to the field? Does the scholar's work open additional areas for further exploration?
- 5. Effective Presentation.** Does the scholar use a suitable style and effective organization to present his or her work? Does the scholar use appropriate forums for communicating work to its intended audiences? Does the scholar present his or her message with clarity and integrity?
- 6. Reflective Critique.** Does the scholar critically evaluate his or her own work? Does the scholar bring an appropriate breadth of evidence to his or her critique? Does the scholar use evaluation to improve the quality of future work?