Writing a literature review
Why write a literature review?

Literature reviews are designed to do two things:

1) give your readers an overview of sources you have explored while researching a particular topic or idea
2) demonstrate how your research fits into the larger field of study
Features of a literature review

A literature review:

- provides a **historical** background for your research;
- gives an overview of the **current context** in which your research is situated by referring to contemporary debates, issues and questions in the field;
- includes a discussion of relevant **theories** and **concepts** which underpin your research;
- introduces relevant **terminology** and provides **definitions** to clarify how terms are being used in the context of your own work;
- describes **related research** in the field and shows how your work extends or challenges this, or addresses a gap in work in the field;
- provides supporting evidence for a practical problem or **issue** which your research is addressing, thereby underlining its **significance**.

(Ridley, 2008, pp.16-17)
## Approaching your literature review

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My research topic</th>
<th>Research questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The purposes of the literature review</td>
<td>Relevant points to include in relation to your own research topic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Historical background</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Contemporary context</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Theories and concepts</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Relevant terminology</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Previous research and its limitations</td>
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<td>The significance of the issue being researched</td>
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(Ridley, 2008, p.28)
Approaching the field

- What aspects of the question have/not been investigated?
- Are there identifiable categories of research focus?
- What are the most recent findings?
- Are there widely recognised gaps or problems?
- Can you identify any major trends or patterns, or any variations?
Tips for approaching the literature

- Use your research question to guide and focus your reading
- Read widely but do not necessarily include all the readings in your review
- Ensure you are familiar with the seminal works in your area and deal with them at least briefly in the review
- Keep your notes systematically organised
- Never throw anything out, either digital or paper
- Be prepared to constantly revise and update your review
Presenting an argument

Synthesise the literature and present your arguments in an appropriate format (avoid the ‘I read this and then I read that’ format).

“… your review of the literature is not a ‘laundry list’ … of previous studies. Essentially you are building up an argument which leads into your research; and as you develop your argument you draw on source texts selectively to provide support for your assertions. By demonstrating ownership of the argument you show that not only are you knowledgeable about the field but also that you are entering into a dialogue with other researchers in your field, that is, you are joining a community of researchers in your area.”

(Ridley, 2008, p.17)
Organisation and structure

Think of the review as a funnel: start wide with the overview and then narrow into discussing the research that relates to your specific topic.

Another approach is to think of yourself as a film director (Rudestam & Newton, 1992). In this way, you might provide your audience with:

- **long shots** to provide a solid sense of the background;
- **middle distance shots** where the key figures and elements to be examined are brought clearly into view;
- **close-up shots** where the precise focus of your work is pinpointed.

**Tip:** Look for themes in the literature or organise by types of study. For example: Group case studies / ethnographies together, especially if all the case studies have related findings, research questions, or other similarities.
Structuring the literature review

There are many ways to organise the literature review. Whichever structure you choose, make sure the structure is apparent to the reader and that the review is logical and coherent.

Common ways to organise literature reviews:

1. Chronological – historical or developmental context
2. Classical Approach – seminal and other major writings
3. Topical or thematic – categories or concepts
4. General-Specific – broad – increasingly specific
5. Combined
Drafting your literature review

Make sure all the information relates to your research question/thesis. You may need to explicitly show how the literature relates to the research question; don't assume the connection is obvious.

Check to see that you have done more than simply summarise your sources. Your literature review should include a critical assessment of those sources.

Be sure to develop questions for further research. Again, you are not simply regurgitating information, but you are assessing and leading your reader to questions of your own, questions and ideas that haven't been explored yet or haven't been addressed in detail by the literature in the field.
Editing

Ensure that the discussion of the literature is coherent and cogent – that it focuses on themes and issues rather than going through books or articles one after another.

A literature review is not an annotated list of readings. It needs to contain an argument – it shows how YOU see the field in which you are working.
Writing the literature review

- Guide the reader through the various viewpoints and debates
- Write the review with the reader in mind:
  - Create coherence between sections
  - Create coherence within paragraphs and sentences
- Use transitions, cross references and links to provide a sense of coherence and unity to the review
- Consider the **weighting** you give to each text; the length you give to each text denotes its significance to your thesis
- Articles of most significance should receive the most attention
- Articulate the connection between the literature and your own research
How not to write a literature review

1. Present the literature in an unconnected, disjointed, disorganised manner
2. Describe one view after another without analysing and evaluating them
3. Include everything that is remotely related to your topic
4. Ignore any gaps that exist in the literature
5. Ignore any controversies that surround debates
6. Focus exclusively on one school of thought at the expense of others
7. Present opinions that are biased or unsupported by evidence
8. Avoid critiquing all ‘experts’ and ‘big name’ thinkers in the field
9. Whatever you do, don’t situate your own work
10. Write the literature review at the beginning of your candidature and forget about keeping it up to date
References


Useful online resources:

Uni. of Toronto, [http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/litrev.html](http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/litrev.html)

Uni. of California Santa Cruz, [http://library.ucsc.edu/ref/howto/literaturereview.html](http://library.ucsc.edu/ref/howto/literaturereview.html)

Uni. of North Carolina, [http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/literature_review.html](http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/literature_review.html)