

LITERATURE REVIEWS

1) Purpose of the literature review

- a) To evaluate the current state of progress in the study of a given topic.
- b) To identify, organise and evaluate published material.
- c) To show that the reviewer knows what has been done, what is being done, and what needs to be done.

2) Types of literature review

- **The simple annotated bibliography** focuses on evaluating published material (b). Find the relevant material on a topic, and write a brief summary and evaluation of each publication, usually in about 100 words. Items are listed alphabetically, each headed by its bibliographical reference as it would be in your reference list. This is often set as a preliminary exercise, especially at honours level.
- **A stand-alone literature review** consists of (a), (b) and (c) structured in the form of an essay. An introduction is required, stating the purpose of the review and the principles of selection. A conclusion summarises the main findings.
- **A section of a research proposal/thesis proposal** focuses on the overview, making it clear how your research will fill a gap/contribute to knowledge in the field. Sometimes it also focuses on possible methods or approaches.
- **A section of a thesis** focuses on (a), (b) and (c). Structure it conceptually and show clearly how the items you have read relate to your chosen field of research.

3) Finding material

- Ask your subject librarian for help.
- Decide how far back you want to go – 10 years? 20?
- Be selective for short literature reviews: ignore minor journals or books by unknown publishers
- Follow up references in standard works
- Do not wander too far from your topic.

4) How to Start

Begin by setting up a record-keeping system that will give you an overview.

| Date | Other bibliographical details | Topic/focus | Argument /thesis | Strengths | Weaknesses | Relevance to own work |
|------|-------------------------------|-------------|------------------|-----------|------------|-----------------------|
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Date - Keep your record in chronological order so that you can see how research develops, changes, challenges earlier thinking etc.

Bibliographical details – make sure you note everything you need to find the source again if necessary. It can also be useful to note the library call number or the search string if you found it on-line. If you are using Endnote or a similar tool, record the bibliographical details there.

Topic/focus – make a brief note to help you remember, unless you are doing an annotated bibliography, when you will need to summarise in several sentences. Sometimes it is relevant to record the method or approach.

Argument/thesis – what is the writer arguing? What is the point of the research?

Strengths/weaknesses – evaluation is difficult, but the more you read about a subject, the easier it is to critique the research as you make comparisons. Always support your evaluation with evidence.

- **Some questions to ask of each bibliographical item:**

Originality: is this an original contribution to knowledge in the field? Is it simply a summary of the work of other researchers? How significant is it? Does it confirm or challenge earlier thinking?

Validity: is the evidence conclusive or are there omissions or limitations e.g. small sample size, highly selective sample, no control group? Have all variables been taken into account?

Theoretical base (if relevant): is this appropriate and adequate?

Bias: is the author presenting a one-sided or biased account?

General scholarship: standard of their literature review, clarity of their argument, quality of evidence, references, presentation of data etc.

- **Some questions to ask to gain an overview:**

Who are the major authorities on the topic, and why are they considered experts?

What are the major theories or points of view about the topic?

What were the major breakthroughs?

What research is currently being conducted in this area?

What research still needs to be done?

5) **Formulating an argument (when required).**

It is very hard to find an argument around which to structure an essay. A fairly standard one would focus on how thinking has changed in the field. Another would be the impact of a different perspective e.g. feminist, new Right. Commonly students have to accept that research shows variations on a theme, or small discoveries on the periphery, rather than anything very major, in which case that is their argument, along with their assessment.

6) **Structure**

- Students will be marked down if an essay-style review consists of a series of summaries rather than a well-structured discussion. Paragraphs should make points, not just record details of research.
- Bibliographical items can be used in groups, and items can be mentioned several times in different contexts.
- If you have been very selective, state the basis of your selection.
- Evaluating comments should be clearly stated, not implicit e.g. 'Brown (1992) convincingly argues that... whereas Smith (1993) offers inadequate data, relying on....'
- The final review should be a readable narrative.