

# STUDENT NOTES FOR SUCCESS

## No 3

### Writing a literature review

A literature review provides an analysis of what has been written or reported by other researchers in an area that you are going to examine or in which you are planning to undertake further research.

#### What is a literature review?

A literature review answers these questions: What have researchers examined in this field/topic? What was the outcome of this research? How do findings from other research studies inform the investigation or study of my topic?



The literature review analyses materials published in academic books and journals which report on matters relevant to the topic that you propose to study further. The review is a record of previous research activities, detailing when they were carried out and what was found. Often a literature review will compare and contrast multiple studies in terms of the approaches taken and the findings reported. Sometimes such studies may be reported in the chronological order in which they were carried out. At other times they may be reported and grouped according to the views expressed by the researchers or the stance taken on certain issues.

To save time and energy, it is important to focus on articles published in your particular area of study. To do this, you must identify a number of keywords when searching through library databases for relevant articles (for example: emotional intelligence/market segmenting/branding).

#### What does a literature review do?

A literature review:

- provides an overall picture of what research has been previously undertaken on a certain issue/ in a certain area and suggests where the future may lie;
- allows you to find out what has already been written on your topic of interest;
- provides a 'starting point' for your own research;
- supplies you, and your reader, with a summary of previous research, directly related to your own proposed work, complete with its strengths and weaknesses;
- allows you to question, examine, analyse and evaluate the research undertaken by experts in your field in order to fill in the gaps or discrepancies found in their work.

#### Quick tips on reviewing literature

- Define your search strategies. What database/s will you use? What are your search terms? Is your search limited to a certain timeframe?
- For each article analyse the title and key words to see how they resemble your own topic of study.
- Scan the journal article abstract to see if it is relevant to your work. Make a note of the findings, recommendations and conclusions.
- If the article is relevant, critically analyse, evaluate and document the findings in a few short sentences (your notes).
- Start grouping the various studies into 'categories', in terms of:
  - whether the findings are similar (compare) or different (contrast);

**OR**

  - different aspects of your topic (e.g. management, managerial effectiveness, managerial ethics and so on);



**OR**

- the sequence of developments (*i.e. an historical perspective*).

The way you categorise studies and therefore develop your literature review is likely to relate to your discipline area and your research topic. Above all, a literature review gives the writer direction. The literature review will provide:

- a starting point for further investigation (if you are planning to undertake research of your own);

**OR**

- an underpinning theory on which to base practice or change (if you have been asked to do a critical literature review as an assignment).

**Reporting what different authors say**

This is a skill that needs to be developed and polished in university studies, particularly at postgraduate level. The important thing to remember is that in a literature review, you are not merely summarising the ideas of others. Rather, you should be analysing, synthesising and comparing and contrasting ideas in order to reach your own conclusions and to develop your own 'voice'. Knowing how to do this well is not easy and is a skill that needs to be developed over time.

**Using appropriate language**

In developing a literature review, it is particularly important to take the stance of the 'impartial' writer/scholar who can evaluate ideas objectively. This is done in a number of ways, but of particular importance are the following techniques:

1. avoiding use of the pronoun 'I'
2. using verbs which reflect analysis and synthesis.



Example 1:

*I think this was an important development in the field of marketing*

**would be better written as**

*It is generally recognised that this was an important development in the field of marketing.*



Example 2:

*Lee (2007) indicates that market forces will determine the price of housing but Roberts (2008) says that government policy will also have an impact.*

**would be better written as**

*Lee (2007) reports that market forces will determine the price of housing while Roberts (2008) disagrees, arguing that government policy will also have an impact.*

When you have finished your review ask yourself:

Does this review provide a good overall picture of what has already been discovered and examined on this topic by relevant authors and researchers?

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<https://businesslaw.curtin.edu.au/study/student-experience/academic-communication-development/>

You might also be interested in *Handy Handout 6. Report Writing*.

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