Writing a Literature Review in Reseach

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Abstract

This paper explores what a literature review are and offers strategies into the form and construction of literature review for the scholars writing a research paper, a thesis, and, a dissertation. The "literature" of a literature review refers to any collection of materials on a topic, not necessarily the great literary texts of the world. A literature review is an essential component of research. It serves several important purposes that contribute to the overall quality and credibility of your paper, thesis, or dissertation. It discusses published information in a particular subject area, and sometimes information in a particular subject area within a certain time period.

Background

A literature review can be just a simple summary of the sources, but it usually has an organizational pattern and combines both summary and synthesis in thesis writing. It is an essential part of any research as it demonstrates the relevance, significance, and contribution of the research to the existing body of knowledge. A summary is a recap of the important information of the source, but a synthesis is a re-organization, or a reshuffling, of that information. It might give a new interpretation of old material or combine new with old interpretations. Or it might trace the intellectual progression of the field, including major debates. And depending on the situation, the literature review may evaluate the sources and advise the reader on the most pertinent or relevant.

A literature review should not only provide useful information about the topic, but also tell a story about how the research questions and objectives emerge from, address, or challenge the current literature. Therefore, a literature review should examine the key terms, concepts, theories, methods, debates, and gaps in the relevant subfields of study, and explain how they relate to the research project. "In this literature review, I aim to explore how the concept of identity is constructed and negotiated in online spaces, especially in relation to gender and sexuality. I will review the main theoretical approaches and empirical studies on this topic, and

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identify the strengths and limitations of each perspective. I will also highlight the gaps and controversies in the existing literature, and propose a new framework for understanding online identity formation that integrates multiple dimensions and levels of analysis" (Smith, 2020, p. 3).

Steps and Strategies

One of the first steps in writing a literature review is to examine the research questions and identify any terms that need to be defined or explained. For example, if the research questions involve concepts such as identity, discourse, culture, ideology, gender, narrative, or collective memory, it is important to clarify what these terms mean and how they are used in the context of the research. Some of these terms may have multiple or contested meanings, or may belong to specific theoretical traditions that require more elaboration. While some key definitions and background information should be provided in the introduction to orient the reader to the topic, the literature review is the place to provide more extended discussions of these terms and their implications for the research. "One of the key terms that I will use throughout this literature review is identity. Identity can be defined as 'the distinctive characteristics of a person's or group's selfhood' (Oxford English Dictionary [OED], 2020). However, identity is not a fixed or static entity, but rather a dynamic and relational process that is shaped by various factors, such as social context, cultural norms, personal experiences, and discursive practices. Identity is also not a singular or homogeneous concept, but rather a multifaceted and heterogeneous one that encompasses different aspects, such as gender identity, sexual identity, ethnic identity, national identity, professional identity, and so on" (Smith, 2020, p. 4).

Another important step in writing a literature review is to identify the main narrative or argument that connects the research project to the existing literature. A literature review should not be a mere summary or description of what others have done or said, but rather a critical analysis and evaluation of how the research project fills a gap, builds a bridge, or solves a puzzle in the current literature. For example, a literature review may show how the research project plugs a gap or fills a hole within an incomplete or underdeveloped literature by addressing a question that has not been answered, a problem that has not been solved, or a perspective that has not been considered. Alternatively, a literature review may show how the research project builds a bridge between two "siloed" or isolated literatures by putting them "in conversation" with each other and demonstrating how they can inform

or enrich each other. Or, a literature review may show how the research project solves a puzzle when the literature contradicts itself by resolving a discrepancy, inconsistency, or controversy in the existing findings or arguments. "The main argument of this literature review is that online identity formation is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be adequately explained by any single theoretical approach or empirical study. Rather than adopting a reductionist or essentialist view of online identity as either fixed or fluid, authentic or performative, individual or collective, I propose a holistic and integrative view that recognizes online identity as both stable and flexible, real and constructed, personal and social. I will demonstrate how this view can bridge the gap between different disciplines and paradigms that have studied online identity from different angles and levels of analysis" (Smith 2020 p. 5).

A literature review should be started as one of the first chapters of the thesis writing process as it helps to establish the foundation and direction of the research. However, a literature review is also an iterative and evolving process that may require revision and refinement as the research progresses and new findings emerge. Therefore, it is advisable to start with key terms and empirical background that are relevant to the research topic and questions, and then identify the two or three subfields that are most pertinent to the research objectives and methods. For those doing deeply inductive work, they may need to adjust their literature review's narrative after they complete their findings to better reflect their contribution to the literature. However, this should not be used as an excuse to procrastinate on becoming familiar with the subfields and writing a partial draft of the literature review. A literature review is a slippery, iterative, and constantly evolving project that requires constant engagement and revision throughout the thesis writing process. "In this literature review, I will first provide an overview of the main theoretical approaches and empirical studies on online identity formation, focusing on three subfields: social psychology, sociology, and media studies. I will then discuss the strengths and limitations of each subfield, and identify the gaps and controversies that exist in the current literature. I will also explain how my research objectives and methods are informed by and contribute to these subfields. Finally, I will present my new framework for understanding online identity formation that integrates multiple dimensions and levels of analysis. This framework is based on my preliminary findings from an online survey and interviews with online users who identify as LGBTQ+. I will discuss how this framework can address some of the limitations and challenges of the existing literature, and suggest directions for future research" (Smith, 2020,

p. 6). So, the main focus of literature review is to develop a new argument, and a thesis is likely to contain a literature review as one of its parts. In thesis, you use the literature as a foundation and as support for a new insight that you contribute. The focus of a literature review, however, is to summarize and synthesize the arguments and ideas of others without adding new contributions.

Why do we write literature reviews?

Literature reviews provide you with a handy guide to a particular topic. If you have limited time to conduct research, literature reviews can give you an overview or act as a stepping stone. For professionals, they are useful reports that keep them up to date with what is current in the field. For scholars, the depth and breadth of the literature review emphasizes the credibility of the writer in his or her field. Literature reviews also provide a solid background for a research paper's investigation. Comprehensive knowledge of the literature of the field is essential to most research papers.

Structure of literature Review

Literature reviews also must have at least three basic elements as the structure of literature review: an introduction or background information section; the body of the review containing the discussion of sources; and, finally, a conclusion and/or recommendations section to end the paper/thesis.

Introduction: Gives a quick idea of the topic of the literature review, such as the central theme or organizational pattern.

Body: Contains your discussion of sources and is organized either chronologically thematically, or methodologically (see below for more information on each).

Conclusions/Recommendations: Discuss what you have drawn from reviewing literature so far. Where might the discussion proceed?

Organizing the body

Once you have the basic categories/structures in place, then you must consider how you will present the sources themselves within the body of your paper. Create an organizational method to focus this section even further.

To help you come up with an overall organizational framework for your review, consider the following scenario and then three typical ways of organizing the sources into a review.

Chronological

If your review follows the chronological method, you could write about the materials above according to when they were published. For instance, first you would talk about the British biological studies of the 18th century, then about Moby Dick, published in 1851, then the book on sperm whales in other art (1968), and finally the biology articles (1980s) and the recent articles on American whaling of the 19th century. But there is relatively no continuity among subjects here. And notice that even though the sources on sperm whales in other art and on American whaling are written recently, they are about other subjects/objects that were created much earlier. Thus, the review loses its chronological focus.

By publication

Order your sources by publication chronology, then, only if the order demonstrates a more important trend. For instance, you could order a review of literature on biological studies of sperm whales if the progression revealed a change in dissection practices of the researchers who wrote and/or conducted the studies.

By trend

A better way to organize the above sources chronologically is to examine the sources under another trend, such as the history of whaling. Then your review would have subsections according to eras within this period. For instance, the review might examine whaling from pre-1600-1699, 1700-1799, and 1800-1899. Under this method, you would combine the recent studies on American whaling in the 19th century with Moby Dick itself in the 1800-1899 category, even though the authors wrote a century apart.

Thematic

Thematic reviews of literature are organized around a topic or issue, rather than the progression of time. However, progression of time may still be an important factor in a thematic review. For instance, the sperm whale review could focus on the development of the harpoon for whale hunting. While the study focuses on one topic, harpoon technology, it will still be organized chronologically. The only difference here between a "chronological" and a "thematic" approach is what is emphasized the most: the development of the harpoon or the harpoon technology.

But more authentic thematic reviews tend to break away from chronological order. For instance, a thematic review of material on sperm whales might examine how they are portrayed as "evil" in cultural documents. The subsections might include how they are personified, how their proportions are exaggerated, and their behaviors misunderstood.

A review organized in this manner would shift between time periods within each section according to the point made.

Methodological

A methodological approach differs from the two above in that the focusing factor usually does not have to do with the content of the material. Instead, it focuses on the "methods" of the researcher or writer. For the sperm whale project, one methodological approach would be to look at cultural differences between the portrayal of whales in American, British, and French art work. Or the review might focus on the economic impact of whaling on a community. A methodological scope will influence either the types of documents in the review or the way in which these documents are discussed.

Once you've decided on the organizational method for the body of the review, the sections you need to include in the paper should be easy to figure out. They should arise out of your organizational strategy. In other words, a chronological review would have subsections for each vital time period. A thematic review would have subtopics based upon factors that relate to the theme or issue. Sometimes, though, you might need to add additional sections that are necessary for your study, but do not fit in the organizational strategy of the body. What other sections you include in the body is up to you. Put in only what is necessary. Here are a few other sections you might want to consider: Current Situation: Information necessary to understand the topic or focus of the literature review.

History: The chronological progression of the field, the literature, or an idea that is necessary to understand the literature review, if the body of the literature review is not already a chronology.

Methods and/or Standards: The criteria you used to select the sources in your literature review or the way in which you present your information. For instance, you might explain that your review includes only peer-reviewed articles and journals. Questions for Further Research: What questions about the field has the review sparked? How will you further your research as a result of the review?
Strategies for writing the literature review

Find a focus

A literature review, like a term paper, is usually organized around ideas, not the sources themselves as an annotated bibliography would be organized. This means that you will not just simply list your sources and go into detail about each one of them, one at a time. No. As you read widely but selectively in your topic area, consider instead what themes or issues connect your sources together. Do they

present one or different solutions? Is there an aspect of the field that is missing? How well do they present the material and do they portray it according to an appropriate theory? Do they reveal a trend in the field? A raging debate? Pick one of these themes to focus the organization of your review.

Convey it to your reader

A literature review may not have a traditional thesis statement (one that makes an argument), but you do need to tell readers what to expect. Try writing a simple statement that lets the reader know what is your main organizing principle. Here are a couple of examples:

The current trend in treatment for congestive heart failure combines surgery and medicine. More and more cultural studies scholars are accepting popular media as a subject worthy of academic consideration.

Consider organization

You've got a focus, and you've stated it clearly and directly. Now what is the most effective way of presenting the information? What are the most important topics, subtopics, etc., that your review needs to include? And in what order should you present them? Develop an organization for your review at both a global and local level:

First, cover the basic categories

Just like most academic papers, literature reviews also must contain at least three basic elements: an introduction or background information section; the body of the review containing the discussion of sources; and, finally, a conclusion and/or recommendations section to end the paper. **The following provides a brief description of the content of each:**

- **Introduction:** Gives a quick idea of the topic of the literature review, such as the central theme or organizational pattern.

- **Body:** Contains your discussion of sources and is organized either chronologically, thematically, or methodologically (see below for more information on each).

- **Conclusions/Recommendations:** Discuss what you have drawn from reviewing literature so far. Where might the discussion proceed?

  Sometimes, though, you might need to add additional sections that are necessary for your study, but do not fit in the organizational strategy of the body. What other sections you include in the body is up to you. Put in only what is necessary. **Here are a few other sections you might want to consider:**

- **Current Situation:** Information necessary to understand the topic or focus of the literature review.

- **History:** The chronological progression of the field, the literature, or an idea that is necessary to understand the literature review, if the body of the literature review is not already a chronology.

- **Methods and/or Standards:** The criteria you used to select the sources in your literature review or the way in which you present your information. For instance, you might explain that your review includes only peer-reviewed articles and journals.

  Questions for Further Research: What questions about the field has the review sparked? How will you further your research as a result of the review?

Begin composing

Once you've settled on a general pattern of organization, you're ready to write each section. There are a few guidelines you should follow during the writing stage as well. Here is a sample paragraph from a literature review about sexism and language to illuminate the following discussion:

However, other studies have shown that even gender-neutral antecedents are more likely to produce masculine images than feminine ones (Gastil, 1990). Hamilton (1988) asked students to complete sentences that required them to fill in pronouns that agreed with gender-neutral antecedents such as "writer," "pedestrian," and "persons." The students were asked to describe any image they had when writing the sentence. Hamilton found that people imagined 3.3 men to each woman in the masculine "generic" condition and 1.5 men per woman in the unbiased condition. Thus, while ambient sexism accounted for some of the masculine bias, sexist language amplified the effect. (Source: Erika Falk and Jordan Mills, "Why Sexist Language Affects Persuasion: The Role of Homophily, Intended Audience, and Offense," Women and Language19:2).

Use evidence

In the example above, the writers refer to several other sources when making their point. A literature review in this sense is just like any other academic research paper. Your interpretation of the available sources must be backed up with evidence to show that what you are saying is valid.

Be selective

Select only the most important points in each source to highlight in the review. The

type of information you choose to mention should relate directly to the review's focus, whether it is thematic, methodological, or chronological.

Use quotes sparingly

Falk and Mills do not use any direct quotes. That is because the survey nature of the literature review does not allow for in-depth discussion or detailed quotes from the text. Some short quotes here and there are okay, though, if you want to emphasize a point, or if what the author said just cannot be rewritten in your own words. Notice that Falk and Mills do quote certain terms that were coined by the author, not common knowledge, or taken directly from the study. But if you find yourself wanting to put in more quotes, check with your instructor.

Summarize and synthesize

Remember to summarize and synthesize your sources within each paragraph as well as throughout the review. The authors here recapitulate important features of Hamilton's study, but then synthesize it by rephrasing the study's significance and relating it to their own work.

Keep your own voice

While the literature review presents others' ideas, your voice (the writer's) should remain front and center. Notice that Falk and Mills weave references to other sources into their own text, but they still maintain their own voice by starting and ending the paragraph with their own ideas and their own words. The sources support what Falk and Mills are saying.

Use caution when paraphrasing

When paraphrasing a source that is not your own, be sure to represent the author's information or opinions accurately and in your own words. In the preceding example, Falk and Mills either directly refer in the text to the author of their source, such as Hamilton, or they provide ample notation in the text when the ideas they are mentioning are not their own, for example, Gastil's. For more information, please see our handout on plagiarism.

Revise, revise, revise

Draft in hand? Now you're ready to revise. Spending a lot of time revising is a wise idea, because your main objective is to present the material, not the argument. So check over your review again to make sure it follows the assignment and/or your outline. Then, just as you would for most other academic forms of writing, rewrite or rework the language of your review so that you've presented your information

in the most concise manner possible. Be sure to use terminology familiar to your audience; get rid of unnecessary jargon or slang. Finally, double check that you've documented your sources and formatted the review appropriately for our discipline.

Literature Review Steps

Richard E West has developed six steps in doing literature review that sounds quite pertinent.

Richard E. West, Brigham Young University

1. Define the Problem
Problem Statement

2-3 page summary of the gap in the literature, your review question, and why you think it matters to the audience you have chosen.

2. Literature Methods Section Searching
Methods Section

A detailed description of your review methods. Usually 1-2 pages.

3. Summarizing
Annotated Bibliography

Detailed annotations and critiques of 3 sources. You will have more, but will practice the skill with 3.

4. Defining the argument
Simple Outline

A simple outline is focusing on broad ideas that are just emerging and what your discovery and advocacy arguments will be.

5. Detailed Argument
Extended Outline

An extended outline of 5-7 pages showcases your logical reasoning and the overall flow of your paper

6. Drafting
Seek feedback from experts, semi-experts, and non-experts. For us this is:

- Draft 1 to peers (15 pages)
- Draft 2 to Rick (20pages
- Draft 3 to peers (25 pages)
- Final version to Rick

7. Communicate your findings
Communicate through visuals, publishing your paper, and presentations with visual storytelling.

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