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ESSENTIALS FOR A GOOD LITERATURE REVIEW

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• INTRODUCTION

You have to do this twice - once in your proposal and once in your dissertation. In your proposal, the literature review is rather like an essay and you discuss the key points of relevant literature that you have found on the topic identified in your title. This section is likely to form the bulk of the proposal and the committee will be looking for evidence that you have found some key texts in the topic area, have read them, identified some key themes and issues and discuss them with a level of understanding. It is not expected that you have undertaken a complete literature search but it is expected that you have made and read around the subject. You cannot develop your research questions and hypotheses unless you have done this. It should be 600-800 words long and include a list of full references. A literature review is not done book by book (or source) but is integrated and written up under key themes and issues that may not have headings.

Writing a review is a demanding exercise. You will not get it right the second time. Much material that you have found and recorded will not be used. Editing and discarding information is heartbreaking but essential.

Some tips on writing up the literature

- Start writing as soon as possible.
- Select and cite only relevant material - you do not need to include a mention of everything you read.
- Group the material into categories and comment upon the most interesting features.
- Be critical. An uncritical review tends to be descriptive, where everything is presented as a one paragraph entry, such as 'Smith (1985) found...; Jones (1987) found...'. A critical review shows that you have studied existing work in the field with a view to your study by pointing out the strengths and weaknesses; by comparing the results of different studies; and by evaluating theories, etc., with reference to your study.
- Use quotations to illustrate a point and add an extra dimension to your argument.

• LITERATURE

Although you might think of novels and poetry when you hear the word "literature," for a piece of research the meaning is more specific. In terms of a literature review, "the literature" means the works you consulted in order to understand and investigate your research problem. Now let's see how useful are the following sources

1. **Journal articles:** these are good especially for up-to-date information. Bear in mind, though, that it can take up to two years to publish articles. They are frequently used in literature reviews because they offer a relatively concise, up-to-date format for research, and because all reputable journals are refereed (i.e. editors publish only the most relevant and reliable research).
2. **Books:** books tend to be less up-to-date as it takes longer for a book to be published than for a journal article. Text books are unlikely to be useful for including in your literature review as they are intended for teaching, not for research, but they do offer a good starting point from which to find more detailed sources.
3. **Conference proceedings:** these can be useful in providing the latest research, or research that has not been published. They are also helpful in providing information on which people are currently involved in which research areas, and so can be helpful in tracking down other work by the same researchers.
4. **Government/corporate reports:** many government departments and corporations commission or carry out research. Their published findings can provide a useful source of information, depending on your field of study.
5. **Newspapers:** since newspapers are generally intended for a general (not specialized) audience, the information they provide will be of very limited use for your literature review. Often newspapers are more helpful as providers of information about recent trends, discoveries or changes, e.g. announcing changes in government policy, but you should then search for more detailed information in other sources.
6. **Theses and dissertations:** these can be useful sources of information. However there are disadvantages: 1) they can be difficult to obtain since they are not published, but are generally only available from the library shelf or through interlibrary loan; 2) the student who carried out the research may not be an experienced researcher and therefore you might have to treat their findings with more caution than published research.
7. **Internet:** the fastest-growing source of information is on the Internet. It is impossible to characterize the information available but here are some hints about using electronic sources: 1) bear in mind that anyone can post information on the Internet so the quality may not be reliable, 2) the information you find may be intended for a general audience and so not be suitable for inclusion in your literature review (information for a general audience is usually less detailed) and 3) more and more refereed electronic journals (e-journals) are appearing on the Internet - if they are refereed it means that there is an editorial board that evaluates the work before publishing it in their e-journal, so the quality should be more reliable (depending on the reputation of the journal).
8. **CD-ROMS:** at the moment, few CR-ROMs provide the kind of specialized, detailed information about academic research that you need for your own research since most are intended for a general audience. However, more and more bibliographies are being put onto CD-ROM for use in academic libraries, so they can be a very valuable tool in searching for the information you need.

9. **Magazines:** magazines intended for a general audience (e.g. Time) are unlikely to be useful in providing the sort of information you need. Specialized magazines may be more useful (for example business magazines for management students) but usually magazines are not useful for your research except as a starting point by providing news or general information about new discoveries, policies, etc. that you can further research in more specialized sources.

- **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

According to Cooper (1988) '... a literature review uses as its database reports of primary or original scholarship, and does not report new primary scholarship itself. The primary reports used in the literature may be verbal, but in the vast majority of cases reports are written documents. The types of scholarship may be empirical, theoretical, critical/analytic, or methodological in nature. Second a literature review seeks to describe, summarize, evaluate, clarify and/or integrate the content of primary reports.'

The review of relevant literature is nearly always a standard chapter of a thesis or dissertation. The review forms an important chapter in a thesis where its purpose is to provide the background to and justification for the research undertaken (Bruce 1994). Bruce, who has published widely on the topic of the literature review, has identified six elements of a literature review. These elements comprise a list; a search; a survey; a vehicle for learning; a research facilitator; and a report (Bruce 1994).

Here are some of the questions your literature review should answer:

1. What do we already know in the immediate area concerned?
2. What are the characteristics of the key concepts or the main factors or variables?
3. What are the relationships between these key concepts, factors or variables?
4. What are the existing theories?
5. Where are the inconsistencies or other shortcomings in our knowledge and understanding?
6. What views need to be (further) tested?
7. What evidence is lacking, inconclusive, contradictory or too limited?
8. Why study (further) the research problem?
9. What contribution can the present study be expected to make?
10. What research designs or methods seem unsatisfactory?

- **ESSENTIALS FOR A GOOD LITERATURE REVIEW**

1. **Remember the purpose:** it should answer the questions we looked at above. Look at how published writers review the literature. You'll see that you should use the literature to explain your research - after all, you are not writing a literature review just to tell your reader what other researchers have done. Your aim should be to show why your research needs to be carried out, how you came to choose certain methodologies or theories to work with, how your work adds to the research already carried out, etc.
2. **Read with a purpose:** you need to summarize the work you read but you must also decide which ideas or information are important to your research (so you can

emphasize them), and which are less important and can be covered briefly or left out of your review. You should also look for the major concepts, conclusions, theories, arguments etc. that underlie the work, and look for similarities and differences with closely related work. This is difficult when you first start reading, but should become easier the more you read in your area.

3. **Write with a purpose:** your aim should be to evaluate and show relationships between the work already done (Is Researcher Y's theory more convincing than Researcher X's? Did Researcher X build on the work of Researcher Y?) and between this work and your own. In order to do this effectively you should carefully plan how you are going to organize your work.

- **TRAPS**

Some traps to avoid:

1. **Trying to read everything!** As you might already have discovered, if you try to be comprehensive you will never be able to finish the reading! The idea of the literature review is not to provide a summary of all the published work that relates to your research, but a survey of the most relevant and significant work.
2. **Reading but not writing!** It's easier to read than to write: given the choice, most of us would rather sit down with a cup of coffee and read yet another article instead of putting ourselves in front of the computer to write about what we have already read! Writing takes much more effort, doesn't it? However, writing can help you to understand and find relationships between the works you've read, so don't put writing off until you've "finished" reading - after all, you will probably still be doing some reading all the way through to the end of your research project.
3. **Not keeping bibliographic information!** The moment will come when you have to write your references page . . . and then you realize you have forgotten to keep the information you need, and that you never got around to putting references into your work. The only solution is to spend a lot of time in the library tracking down all those sources that you read, and going through your writing to find which information came from which source.

- **STRUCTURING A LITERATURE REVIEW**

It is often difficult to decide how to organize the huge amount of information you have collected. The structure of each dissertation will be different but there are some general principles and these are really the guidelines you should use for any piece of academic writing. The dissertation is just much longer than most essays or other pieces of work.

- **Introduction to the literature review**

There should be an introduction to your literature that signposts the content by stating the approach you will take and puts forward the central ideas and purpose of the literature review. It 'sets the scene' and provides a 'map' of where the literature review is going to take the reader and why. It should also stimulate interest. It is

likely that this part will have to be written after the main sections. It is not likely to be more than half a page long but needs to be carefully crafted.

- **Main part**

This should consist of discrete sections arranged in a logical order. Unlike an essay where paragraphs are simply arranged in order without headings, a dissertation needs clear headings due to the size of the work. Headings help the reader, and you the writer, to keep on track. Each section should be devoted to one topic or theme and each paragraph within each section should confine itself to a single idea. The first sentence of a paragraph should indicate what the paragraph is about in some way and then move on to develop that idea supported by evidence and examples. Avoid having a lot of short paragraphs of one or two sentences. Also avoid lots of lists. This may be appropriate for report and business-style writing but is not suitable for essays or dissertations.

The key concept here is of developing an argument, and your tutors will be looking for the following:

- The writing shows a sense of purpose and direction, as though the writer knows where he or she is going and is leading the reader there step-by-step.
- There is a definite central idea with reasons for it and evidence to back it up and support it.
- The writing may present a 'case' for a certain viewpoint.
- The writing is logical with ideas or events linked together in a logical sequence.
- The ideas are put together in a way that is clear to the writer and to the reader.

- **THE BASICS OF GOOD WRITING**

So you're going to sit down at your computer, go through your notes, and in a few hours produce a piece of research writing. It is impossible to start from nothing and produce a good piece of writing, because it is very hard to organize your material and write at the same time. If you are working out which piece of research to talk about next and worrying about verb agreement, you are less likely to produce a good piece of writing. Here are some suggestions:

1. **Plan your writing.** Before you start writing, find a way to organize your material so that you know what you are going to write about, in what order, and what you're going to say. Try writing an outline. Trying writing your ideas down on the back of an envelope, or a piece of old paper. It doesn't have to be beautiful; it just has to help you think about what you are going to say. Use whatever method works for you, no matter how strange!
2. **Ignore the language!** When you plan your writing, don't worry about the language. Concentrate on what you are going to say. Write in notes so that you don't have to think about verb agreement. Don't waste time worrying about spelling. You can think about all these aspects of writing after you've decided what you are going to say.

3. **Write and rewrite!** More experienced writers rewrite more times and more substantially than less experienced writers. Are you surprised? Good writing takes time for everyone. The better a writer you become, the more you will appreciate that the first thoughts/ideas/writing that comes out of your head and onto the page can be improved.
4. **Find readers!** Ask people to read what you've written. Ask friends, professors, ask your writing advisor in languages. But don't wait until your writing is "perfect" because then if people suggest changes you won't want to make them! Give people drafts and let them know what sort of feedback you want: comments on organization? on ideas? on your language? on the technical aspects of what you've written?
5. **Keep writing!** Good writing takes practice. The only person who can make you a better writer is you. So work at it, show your work to other people, and rewrite, rewrite, rewrite. There are plenty of writing handbooks and guides available. They can give lots of useful hints and tips, but if the methods they suggest do not work for you then use a different method: there is no one way to write. Of course the way you write depends very much on what suits you, and what suits the particular piece of writing you are working on.

- **CONCLUSION**

The literature review is a key part of your dissertation and it is your chance to show that you have the skills of academic writing appropriate for an honours graduate. We should have used all these skills before in your earlier studies but the dissertation takes the skills of reading and writing to a higher level than you have achieved before. In this unit, we help you develop your academic skills to the level required. These skills are: searching the literature; record keeping; reading the literature critically; making notes; writing a literature review; referencing and compiling a bibliography.

- **REFERENCES**

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- 4) How to Write a Literature Review: www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts_pdf/Literature%20Review.pdf
- 5) The Literature Review: <http://www.deakin.edu.au/library/litrev.html>
- 6) Research and Writing: using the literature:
<http://www.clet.ait.ac.th/EL21LIT.HTM>
- 7) Reviews of Literature
<http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/ReviewofLiterature.html>
- 8) Dissertation Doctor (Humorous, Human Interest Side - but some good advice as well)
- 9) Writing the Literature Review: <http://www.ems.uq.edu.au/phdweb/phlink18.htm>
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