

The Literature Review

The Criteria and The Structure

Purpose

- The literature review is a review of the research and / or current discussion about a particular problem that has been identified, and / or needs to be answered. There are different approaches to literature reviews depending on your purpose, and it is advisable to consult your subject outline, lecturer or supervisor before you begin.

Value

- To acquire an understanding of your topic
- Identify what has already been done on the topic and
- How it has been researched
- Identify what the key issues are

Expectations

- In your writing you are expected to demonstrate your understanding of the previous research on your topic.
You show this by:
 1. Identifying the main theories and explaining them
 2. Show how they have been applied and developed
 3. Recognise the main criticisms that have been made of work on the topic

Critical Reading, Evaluation, and Evidence of Critical Thinking

It is important to read and critically evaluate the information you locate.

- Take notes of -
 1. Information
 2. Thoughts you have about this information
 3. Develop a framework for your notes into groups, categories or under headingsThis will help you draw your ideas together when you begin writing

Check This!

- Have a framework in place for recording your notes.
- When reading, try to look at the same thing from different perspectives.
- Ensure all references are complete. Include page numbers of any direct quotes and paraphrases of good ideas.
- Watch your language! You may be able to draw inferences, but 'proof' is elusive when dealing with human beings.
- Remember, unless you are comparing like with like, you cannot make claims of comparability

Check This!

- Do not be tempted to leave out any reports of research just because they differ from your own findings.
- Start the first draft of your review early in your first reading; you can build onto it as you go. Remember, 'writing is a messy process' and you will be writing many more drafts before you have a coherent and 'critical' account.

Selecting Methods for Data Collection

- The following is a general framework for organising your readings and notes.
- Within each section are some critical questions to guide your thinking.

Structure and Critical Questions

1. Introduction
 - What is the research topic about?
 - How have you narrowed this down to a particular topic?
2. Establish a Context
 - Why is your topic important?

Structure and Critical Questions

1. Theoretical Base
 - What are the theories?
2. Report the different theoretical approaches
 - Can you interpret and describe the differing research on the topic?
 - Is there a clearly stated research question?
 - Are there hypotheses?
 - Are they clearly stated?
 - Are the relationships between the main variables explicit and reasonable?
 - Are the hypothesis stated clearly so that they are easily testable and can results be interpreted easily?

Structure and Critical Questions

1. Research
 - THIS STEP IS MOST IMPORTANT!
Identify what specific research has been done and decide whether this research supports or conflicts with the theoretical base.
To answer this, ask yourself:
 - what stand does this piece of research take in relation to the theoretical base?
 - What type of research has been conducted? (surveys, interviews, transects)?
 - Is it quantitative or qualitative?
 - Are controls for the variables to be tested?

Structure and Critical Questions

- Could the design of the research be improved?
How? What?
- Is reliability and validity discussed?
- Is the measure for reliability and validity appropriate? What gaps can you identify?
- Is the sample population specified and appropriate for the research question being posed?
- Can the results be generalised on the basis of this sample?

Structure and Critical Questions

1. Results and Discussion (Validation & Justification)
 - Make a judgement as to whether the research supports or conflicts with the theoretical base?
 - Is the data appropriate?
 - Are the statistical techniques appropriate and adequately described?
 - Could or should the research be duplicated?
 - Are the control variables handled effectively in the data analysis?
 - Are there other control variables that could / should have been considered?

Structure and Critical Questions

- Are the conclusions of the study consistent with the results of the statistical analyses?
- Are alternative conclusions considered?
- Are alternative conclusions that are consistent with the differing research discussed and accounted for?

Structure and Critical Questions

1. Consequences (Limitations and Implications)
 - Are both the theoretical and practical implications of the results addressed and discussed?
 - Are limitations to the study identified and discussed?

Structure and Critical Questions

1. Conclusion
 - It is important at this stage to 'step back' from all the ideas you have reported
 - What is your overall assessment?
 - Do you think the study has adequately explored the research problem?
 - What can you say about the advancement of knowledge in your field of expertise in light of this research?
 - Can you identify any gaps or areas that require further research?

Remember

- The paper will most probably require multiple readings
- Don't take these subject headings as gospel! You will most likely find additional headings.
- Work with your lecturer / supervisor – bring up issues related to the theoretical base; discuss your outstanding questions and problems of understanding; define your understandings; ask for others' viewpoints, etc.
- Always question – don't just accept a piece of work as “the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth”.