

# Reviewing the literature

## A critical review

Tertiary students are often required to write a critical literature review as part of their undergraduate or postgraduate work.

The aim of this review is to demonstrate that the writer has extensively researched the literature and critically evaluated its quality. This means reviewing and assessing all the different ways other researchers have approached the problem or topic that you are interested in.

It is not enough to describe what others have discovered. You need to view their work with your own insight. An effective review describes, synthesises and analyses material from a range of sources. It should have a clear focus and direction and be presented in a logical, clear and well-organised manner using academic style both correctly and consistently. The final product of the literature review should be a type of proposition, not an answer.

## Getting started

To write a literature review you need to find and read a wide range of literature about the topic. Begin writing as soon as you begin reading about your topic area. This writing may take the form of notes or ideas from the literature and will help in developing a broad plan for the review and formulating what sections may be included.

### Locating the literature

The first step towards a good literature review is a comprehensive literature search. You need to access a wide range of the available literature in your area of study. Remember that the age of material is important. Generally, references should reflect recent information. Start with the seminal reference everyone else cites and use bibliographies and reference lists from this and other major texts to direct you to more sources.



Methods for locating literature include: searching library catalogues (both on and off campus) and relevant CD-ROM databases, conducting online library searches and checking library links on the web, as well as consulting other Internet resources.

### **Reading the literature**

To present a critical review of the literature, a thorough evaluation of the material is needed. Ask questions and sift through information. This stage of your review requires critical and active reading, and it is important to keep your purpose for reading in mind while you read. Previewing and skim-reading will help you to focus your thoughts, identify key issues or arguments under discussion, or even help to evaluate the relative merits of the contents.

### **Asking questions**

The following questions will help you read the material in an active manner and sharpen your analytical skills. Consider all possible aspects of each text that might affect your assessment and use of it in your own work:

**The author:** Who wrote the material and where and when was this work published?

**The purpose:** Why and for whom was the material written? What was the author trying to discover and why is this information/research important?

**The approach:** What is the theoretical perspective of the author and does it differ from current belief about the topic area? What issue, paradigm or philosophy influenced the writer's perspective, and how does s/he develop his/her ideas? Are there any biases or inconsistencies in the information presented?

**The content:** What is the controlling focus in the material? Is supporting information well researched and accurate, and does it support or link to the topic? What aspects are included/omitted, both from literature examinations and research projects? Are findings, discussion and conclusions logical?

How does this perspective, or these results, differ from others and how do these findings apply to your own work?

**The structure:** Does the introduction indicate aims, thesis and main points of argument? Is there a significant order to the main points, and/or a logical relation between sections that affects the overall argument or discussion?

**Style and format:** Is the presentation style simple, complex, narrative, analytical, persuasive, or didactic, and how does this style influence the reaction to the material?

These questions are not exhaustive. They will form the basis of your written review. Asking them as you read will tend to slow your reading process down, because you will be thinking as you go. However, doing your analytical work early will make the process of writing a critical review much easier. If you take comprehensive notes in your own words as you read and think, you will have done the really hard work before you start to write.

### **Managing the information**

You will need an organised system to keep track of your references. When you find an article, put the publication details straight into your referencing system, listing the

material by content area, call number or web site, and source. Methods for keeping track of references include:

- Endnote bibliographic software, or another referencing program
- A computer application such as an electronic card file or spread-sheet or database program
- A paper-based file of bibliographic information, with cross-referencing

## Beginning to write

One of the difficult aspects of writing a literature review is knowing when to stop reading and start writing. As writing is part of the process of researching your review, you should begin writing as soon as you have a basic understanding of your topic area. This will then inform you of the need for, and areas of, further reading. Continually review your drafts and add comments, questions and ideas. This is a good way to make connections and comparisons between different articles, particularly if your reading is spread out over a long period of time.

### Structuring your review

To ensure that your literature review is a coherent piece of work, you need a plan and an overall structure. Some of this planning work can happen as you read, but you may also need to do a brainstorming session to work out a plan for the review as a whole. The concepts must be presented in an order that makes sense, with clear divisions in the sets of ideas to be discussed. There are usually many different ways to organise information in a literature review. For example:

**Chronologically:** starting with the earliest work on the topic and moving through to the latest.

**By theoretical perspective:** identifying the key theorists and theories that have shaped subsequent writing on the topic.

**In order of significance or relevance:** where studies or writing on the topic fall into a range of significant or less significant findings. There may also be varying degrees of relevance amongst the range of studies dealing with a topic.

**By methodological type:** when different methodological approaches have clearly affected the findings of the studies.

**By issue or theme (thematically):** grouping a broad range of loosely associated research into a set of common subject areas (or themes). These themes will form the basis of the different threads that are the focus of your study.

Organizing the material around issues and findings relevant to your work can not only provide a context but also reinforces its significance. This can help you avoid a common error in literature reviews where writers present material from one author, followed by information from another, then another. For example: Brown (1995) found this, Smith (1997) found that, Jones (2000) found the other and Green, Sanders and Jackson (1999) found something else. This reads more as a list rather than a discussion of the similarities, differences, strengths, etc.

## Constructing an argument

To write a cohesive and critical literature review, you need to present a clear line of argument. That means taking all those critical comments you made in your reading notes, and using them to express an academic opinion. Facts and theory in the literature substantiate these opinions. Make sure that:

- Examples, citations and quotations are used where appropriate
- Each section of the review is clearly connected. The outline statement in the introduction makes the order of the arguments clear and gives some reason for the author's choice in ordering the material
- The literature review is written in academic prose that is clear, concise, unambiguous, objective and accurate. It should not be pompous or difficult to read

<b>Considerations for a critical literature review</b>	
<b>Structure</b>	Is the review clearly introduced and concluded? Is the material effectively organised for the topic? Does it conform to academic writing requirements?
<b>Selection of the material</b>	Is all relevant information included? Is the literature from a range of sources?
<b>Referencing</b>	Are all bibliographic details (both in-text and reference list) accurate, complete and consistently documented?
<b>Critical evaluation of the literature</b>	Has the literature been presented and evaluated clearly and objectively? Does the amount of detail included on an issue correspond to its importance? Is there sufficient evaluation of design and methodological issues? Are authors' conflicting and complementary ideas presented and discussed?
<b>Interpretation</b>	Has this discussion of the current literature contributed to the reader's understanding? How? Do the conclusions present outcomes or implications of the review?

## References

Allen, M. (1997). *Smart thinking: Skills for critical understanding and writing*. Oxford University Press: Melbourne.

Caulley, D.N. (1992). *Writing a critical review of the literature*. La Trobe University: Bundoora.