

## **A Review of the Literature**

Why do a review of the literature?

- *Knowledge does not exist in a vacuum, and your work only has value in relation to other people."*
- *Your work and your findings will be significant only to the extent that they are the same as, or different from, other people's work and findings."* (Jankowicz, 2005).
- Therefore you must describe what has been published and organise the information in a relevant and critical way.
- You need knowledge to put together an appropriate research design.

The purpose of a review of the literature is to help you gain an understanding of a particular topic or problem and help in developing and assessing arguments. A review of the literature is concise and to the point and based on a variety of sources. It should include definitions of the issue and position it in context alongside previous research. The issue should be evaluated based on what you have found - and related to what others have found. In other words compare and contrast what you have learned from your research with others' findings. Conclude by summarizing the key findings.

Searching the literature is based on a three-stage process:

1. Identifying subject-matter relevant to your topic, using a mixture of concepts and ideas; topic names (keywords or key terms; and author names, to ...
2. ... develop a systematic list of reference of authors who have published on these subjects, going on to ...
3. ... use this information to access the publications themselves, looking particularly for the core texts of your subject-matter.

You will go through these 3 stages several times as you familiarise yourself with the issue!

Please read the following stages which should help you start the process!

### **Step 1: Understanding the question**

You must look very closely at the precise wording of the question. What exactly is the task you are being asked to undertake? Look for the vital words/phrases, which determine exactly what you must do. Reviews of the literature require you to:

Compare	Look for similarities and differences between; perhaps reach a conclusion about which is preferable.
Contrast	Set in opposition in order to bring out the differences.
Criticize	Give your judgment about the merit of theories, opinions or truth; back your judgment by reference to the evidence or reasoning involved.
Define	Set down the precise meaning of a word or phrase. In some cases it may be necessary (or desirable) to examine two or more definitions of the same thing.
Describe	Give a detailed or graphic account of.
Discuss	Investigate or examine the arguments; sift and debate them; give reasons for and against; examine the implications of.
Evaluate	Make an appraisal of the worth of something; judge its truth or usefulness; perhaps include your personal opinion.
Explain	Make plain; interpret and account for; give reasons
Illustrate	Use a figure or diagram to explain or clarify; or make clear by the use of examples.
Interpret	Expound the meaning of; make clear and explicit. This often requires giving your own judgment also.
Relate	Show how things are connected to each other, and to what extent they are alike, or affect each other.
Review	Make a survey of, examining the subject carefully.

Summarize Give a concise account of the chief points of a matter, omitting details and examples.

## **2. Collecting the Information**

Start early. It will take more time than you anticipate collecting together all the information you need. Do some preliminary thinking and start to do some background reading as soon as possible after you know the title. The most obvious source is any reading suggested by your professor, but you may find other sources yourself: Scrutinize the bibliographies of the recommended books/articles; there may be a span of books on the library shelves - look at their indexes and tables of contents; remember your own notes; and do not ignore wider sources such as newspapers or magazines, TV or radio programs. Always record your sources, the author and title of the book; the name of the speaker. You will have to give full credit to these sources in due course, in a bibliography at the end of your essay, usually.

## **3. Drawing up a plan**

Having a plan or outline for your review of literature gives you a vital shape or structure from which to work. It helps to identify the main themes and ideas and arguments, which you intend to follow. The traditional basic framework of "a beginning, a middle and an end" has a lot to recommend it.

A review of the literature should consist of an introduction, definitions, descriptions, comparisons, information and argument (or opinions), and the conclusion. The introduction might cover: definitions, if such are necessary; some explanation of what you understand by the title; the aspects of the topic you intend dealing with - and why; and perhaps the broad arguments which you consider will support your answer. In other words, it will give your reader a clear idea of what is to follow.

One tip worth repeating is to write your own abstract for your review of the literature. It forces you to look for the essence of what you are trying to say. Examine abstracts in academic journals and try to emulate them for your assignment. It will help you to structure your thoughts and your writing. An abstract is not the same as an introduction.

The information and argument - the body of the review - will take each of the main points of information and argument and develop them, with examples and illustrations. We shall return to the actual process of doing this later on.

The conclusion will summarize your main theme. It will often include a firm answer to the question based on the material you have deployed - or even just a tentative one, if you think the available evidence is insufficient for a firm answer; and it might offer some thoughts on future trends and wider implications.

As for the relative length of each section, there are no hard and fast rules. However, it's worth thinking in terms of the introduction taking up no more than 10%, and the conclusion about 15%.

Always plan - it may take just a few minutes (as in an exam) or as much as an hour. But only by having a plan will you be able to present your answer in a coherent, logical and concise fashion.

#### **4. Writing it up**

There are many ways of presenting a good review of the literature once you know the material you wish to communicate. It is often a good idea to write a first draft and then leave it for a while before reviewing it. Quite often you will find inconsistencies, disconnections and irrelevancies. Please present to your professor who will help you to edit.

#### **5. Style**

Writing style is much less important than you might think. What is really important is to write with clarity of meaning, and correct grammar and punctuation. There are a number of "avoids" which are worth listing.

- \* Avoid long, difficult and complex sentences.
- \* Avoid obscure words and expressions, especially if you are not quite sure of their meaning.
- \* Avoid also slang, jargon, colloquialisms and abbreviations. Your main objective is to be clear and concise, so that your reader can follow your argument with ease.

- \* Avoid redundant words and phrases
- \* Avoid the passive mood where possible.
- \* Avoid the use of jargon for its own sake, and when short simple words will do use them
- \* Avoid lengthy paragraphs. Remember the old journalists' adage, 'solid blocks tire the eye'.

Any professional writer will tell you that there is a format or convention to which they have to conform, be it writing for an academic journal or even the Readers Digest. One of the first tasks is to find out the required convention is and to write accordingly.

## **6. Organization**

In general, it is quite a good idea to show your reader the stages by which your argument develops. Think about how to divide it up. "Signposting" can be very useful - it can help if you use headings to introduce new topics. They establish and reinforce the coherence of your thinking, they enable your reader to see clearly the precise aspect or issue of the topic, which you are addressing; they allow you to move from one issue to another without the need for complex linking sentences. The following is one way of setting out and organizing a review of the literature:

### (a) Aims and objectives: statement of problem

This is akin to an abstract in a good academic journal. Introduce the issue you are going to discuss and the methods you are going to use in doing so. State your case in general terms: describe the issue you are going to discuss. You may next comment briefly on what other scholars have had to say about the subject. Lastly, summarize the overall theme indicating the main points you will make and the order in which you intend to present them. This will give your reader a clear idea of what to expect, and will greatly assist his/her comprehension.

There is one additional point on expressing your opinion. Even though the task may ask you for your views it is customary to avoid using the first

person singular, 'I' or 'my'. As a rule of thumb, don't use this unless it is unavoidable.

(b) Factual material

In this next section, present the relevant factual material drawn from the books or other sources you have used. In other words, before offering opinions of your own, show the reader what you know about the subject.

(c) Analysis of factual material

Here you show the reader what you think about the subject or issues by carefully considering the material you have presented. Draw together points from the descriptive section (b), showing important inter-relations between them, which were not apparent or obvious until this stage. In this way, the argument sketched in the first section (a) will now become completely clear.

(d) Conclusion

In this last section, restate, in terms of the descriptive material you have presented and analyzed, the review's aims and objectives. In other words, this is the final restatement of your argument, referring once again to the evidence and analysis necessary to support your case.

## Sources

- Textbooks provide background, key terms, and key authors.
- Academic journal articles & research books are usually the primary source of literature e.g. Academy of Management Review.
- Trade and professional publications useful especially for research context e.g. Management Today.
- Industry & government reports, newspapers and magazines also provide context.

**Acknowledging Sources** as we noted earlier, it is essential to identify the sources not only of direct quotations from other authors, but also of ideas drawn from them. The first essential is a bibliography at the end of your review listing (in alphabetical order according to author) all the books, articles and other publications which you have used or consulted in writing your review. In addition, quotations should be acknowledged and attributed as they occur in the text of your review, generally giving author's name, year of publication, book/journal etc. and page reference. Even where you are not quoting directly from an author you must acknowledge him/her as the source of some idea or information, which you are using in your review. The acknowledgement need only consist of a phrase such as: "According to Black (1986)...." Supporting information or matters tangential to your main argument might be included as footnotes, either on a page by page basis, or at the end of the main body of the review.

### **Final Thoughts!**

The review should provide the readers with a picture of state of knowledge on an issue and the subject area being investigated. It is a demanding and enjoyable process requiring great skill, especially in knowing what to leave in and what to leave out.