



Literature Review

Introduction

One of the most challenging and time-consuming stages of any research project involves gaining a deeper understanding of the topic through locating and reading a wide variety of relevant books and articles. While you may have consulted academic literature for previous university assignments, your research project will involve a more systematic review of literature related to your topic. This part of doing research is usually an ongoing task in the sense that you will reread selected works during the writing stage and search for related items when you notice a gap in your review of the literature.

1) What is a Literature Review?

One of the essential preliminary tasks when you undertake a research study is to go through the existing literature in order to acquaint yourself with the available body of knowledge in your area of interest. Reviewing the literature can be time consuming, daunting and frustrating, but it is also rewarding. The literature review is an integral part of the research process and makes a valuable contribution to almost every operational step. It has value even before the first step; that is, when you are merely thinking about a research question that you may want to find answers to through your research journey. In the initial stages of research it helps you to establish the theoretical roots of your study, clarify your ideas and develop your research methodology. Later in the process, the literature review serves to enhance and consolidate your own knowledge base and helps you to integrate your findings with the existing body of knowledge. Since an important responsibility in research is to compare your findings with those of others, it is here that the literature review plays

an extremely important role. During the write-up of your report it helps you to integrate your findings with existing knowledge – that is, to either support or contradict earlier research. The higher the academic level of your research, the more important a thorough integration of your findings with existing literature becomes.

In summary, a literature review has the following functions:

- It provides a theoretical background to your study.
- It helps you establish the links between what you are proposing to examine and what has already been studied and avoid plagiarism.
- It enables you to show how your findings have contributed to the existing body of knowledge in your profession. It helps you to integrate your research findings into the existing body of knowledge.

In relation to your own study, the literature review can help in four ways. It can:

a. bring clarity and focus to your research problem

When reviewing the literature you learn what aspects of your subject area have been examined by others, what they have found out about these aspects, what gaps they have identified and what suggestions they have made for further research. All these will help you gain a greater insight into your own research questions and provide you with clarity and focus which are central to a relevant and valid study. In addition, it will help you to focus your study on areas where there are gaps in the existing body of knowledge, thereby enhancing its relevance.

b. improve your research methodology

Going through the literature acquaints you with the methodologies that have been used by others to find answers to research questions similar to the one you are investigating. By becoming aware of any problems and pitfalls, you will be better positioned to select a methodology that is capable of providing valid answers to your research question. This will increase your confidence in the methodology you plan to use and will equip you to defend its use.

c. broaden your knowledge base in your research area

The most important function of the literature review is to ensure you read widely around the subject area in which you intend to conduct your research study. It is important that

you know what other researchers have found in regard to the same or similar questions, what theories have been put forward and what gaps exist in the relevant body of knowledge.

d. contextualise your findings

Obtaining answers to your research questions is comparatively easy: the difficult part is examining how your findings fit into the existing body of knowledge. How do answers to your research questions compare with what others have found? What contribution have you been able to make to the existing body of knowledge? How are your findings different from those of others? Undertaking a literature review will enable you to compare your findings with those of others and answer these questions. It is important to place your findings in the context of what is already known in your field of enquiry.

2) Getting Started/ Where to Begin?

Starting research often means finding an overview of a topic, checking facts and data, checking dates of significant events, or looking up definitions of specialized terms. Reference books can give background information, including the scope of the topic area, noteworthy people, and statistics to help jumpstart your research.

- Recognize that research is an iterative nonlinear process.
- Identify the parts of the research process and modify one's plans accordingly
- Locate and select resources to support each step of the process
- Seek help from professionals when needed

In order to be able to do so , you may need to:

- ✓ Think about your interests. What would you like to spend time learning more about? Look over your course materials and lecture notes for ideas. Write down a list of keywords and phrases that interest you.
- ✓ Start with a research question means approaching your research with curiosity and an open mind.
- ✓ Ask questions. You should let your question guide you both in practical terms of helping you come up with search terms (keywords) as well as in avoiding bias by assuming you know the outcome or answer.
- ✓ Make sure you understand your research process.
- ✓ Get help by talking to your professor or graduate assistant if you have any questions.
- ✓ Use a topic ideas database.
- ✓ Read current periodicals, browse the internet, and check out reference resources and encyclopedias.

Identifying literature for your research project is not finding and copying information from books or personal websites, Wikipedia, blogs or any other of the thousands of non-academic websites that exist on the Internet.

3) Types of Sources

When you chose a topic and determined your research questions, you conducted preliminary research to stimulate your thinking. Reviewing the research literature means finding, reading, and summarizing the published research relevant to your question. It is very important to review the literature early in the research process for several reasons.

- It can help you turn a research idea into an interesting research question.
- It can tell you if a research question has already been answered.
- It can help you evaluate the interestingness of a research question.
- It can give you ideas for how to conduct your own study.
- It can tell you how your study fits into the research literature

At this stage, students are ready to conduct a more focused, systematic search for informative primary and secondary sources which include a wide range of types, among which :

i. **Encyclopedias:** Encyclopedias are reference works that contain summaries or overviews of topics rather than original insights. These overviews are presented in alphabetical order. Although they are often written by experts, Encyclopedia entries are not typically attributed to a single author and do not provide the specialized knowledge expected of scholarly sources. As a result, they are best used as sources of background information at the beginning of your research. You can then expand your knowledge by consulting more academic sources. Encyclopedias can be general or subject-specific:

- **General encyclopedias** contain entries on diverse topics.
- **Subject encyclopedias** focus on a particular field and contain entries specific to that field (e.g., Western philosophy or molecular biology).

ii. **The internet:** it is a great source for preliminary research and can help you to learn more about a topic you're new to. However, they are not always credible sources. Many websites do not provide the author's name, so it can be hard to tell if they are an expert. Websites often do not cite their sources, and they typically do not subject their content to peer review. For these reasons, you should carefully consider whether any web sources you use are appropriate to cite or not. Some websites are more credible than others. Look for DOIs or trusted domain extensions:

- ☞ URLs that end with **.edu** are specifically educational resources.
- ☞ URLs that end with **.gov** are government-related

Both of these are typically considered trustworthy.

While the Internet represents a tremendous resource, it is important to remember that there is no quality control of the information you find. Therefore, you need to be careful when using the Internet to avoid any problems:

- ☞ **The misuse of keywords:** To find relevant information from books, journals, electronic databases or the Internet, you need to think of keywords that will guide your search. However, you should be careful and selective when using keywords for your search. To find literature for your research project using keywords, do not write a sentence (or a question) in the search field. To search using keywords, identify the most important terms that are used to talk about your topic (e.g. ‘colonialism’, ‘motivation’, ‘simultaneous interpretation’...) together with words that are important to describe a particular aspect of your topic (e.g. type of institution, the level of students, gender, nationality, language . . .).

Example: To find literature on students’ attitudes towards their studies and levels of achievement, Zareen used the following keywords: ‘gender’, ‘student achievement’, ‘university grades’, ‘attitudes’ and ‘study habits’. She usually combined two of these terms – for example, she typed in ‘gender’ and ‘student achievement’ – or even three terms: ‘gender’, ‘attitudes’ and ‘student achievement’. Between each keyword she typed ‘and’.

An effective search usually means combining a keyword ‘term’ with a keyword descriptor. Try the following two searches using www.scholar.google.com. Which search produced more useful results?

- simultaneous interpretation AND university students AND English AND Arabic
- simultaneous interpretation AND Arabic.

- ☞ **Untrusted sources:** As mentioned earlier, a useful Internet site to find previous research on your topic is Google Scholar (www.scholar.google.com). Insert your keywords (or keyword combinations) into the search field to find bibliographic material relevant to your topic. Not all information in the search results will be useful; you need to skim read the short description of each result. As you may have hundreds (or even thousands) of results, it would probably be sufficient to skim through the first two or three pages of results. When you use Google Scholar, a ‘PDF’ symbol appears to the right of some results. This tells you that the document is freely accessible

and can be downloaded onto your computer. Google Scholar contains academic-type documents (such as articles and conference papers), but the quality can vary enormously. If the publisher is a quality academic journal or an official organization (national or international), the document may well be useful for your research project. If you are not sure whether the document or information you have found is appropriate, ask your supervisor.

Some websites like www.....edu/ www.....org/ www.....ac which end with edu(education), org(organization), or ac(academic) are trusted sources. When you download a document from the Internet, note down the site (the URL) where you found it (i.e. copy the site information from your browser and paste this into a Word document). This information should appear in your list of references, usually accompanied by the date when the site was accessed (e.g. ‘Accessed on 7 November 2021’). This is included because some documents may disappear from the site or they may be altered in some way (information may be added or deleted). Including the date when the document was accessed informs your reader that at that particular time (e.g. 7 November 2021’), the information you refer to was accessible on that site.

Evaluating the appropriateness of websites

How can you tell if an Internet site would be considered an authoritative source of information for your project?

1 Look at the URL. You should be able to tell whether it is an institution or a private website.

2 Is the site that of a private institution? If so, the information on the site is probably for promotional purposes and not suitable for academic work.

3 Is this site a private website? The information on private websites cannot usually be considered to be objective or 'academic'. They are not usually suitable as background reading on your topic and should not be used for your Literature Review.

4 Is the site that of a national (or international) institution? Websites of national institutions often have useful documents available. These may be studies that were done in the country by researchers working for the institution or academics based at a university. If the studies were funded by an institution or by the government, the information they present may not be impartial, but on occasion they may be the only source available for some information.

5 Is the site that of a university? Sometimes universities have documents (or links to documents) that are accessible from their website. These are usually authored by an academic who is an authority on the topic. Sometimes these documents have been published in a journal with open access. Such documents may be useful for your work and can be considered suitable for your background reading and Literature Review.

6 Is the site that of a journal? Some journals are open access, others are not. If it is open access, this means that you can read and download the articles from the website without having to pay. You will find many journals have an open-access policy. While the quality of some open-access journals can be quite high, this is not always the case. If you are not sure, check with your supervisor whether it would be appropriate to use a particular article downloaded from an open-access journal. Articles in subscription journals can only be downloaded if the university provides access or by paying.

Exercise: Go to the following Internet sites. Can they be used as authoritative sources for your research project? Give reasons for your answer.

a www.mingoville.com

b www.tefl-tips.com

c www.readingmatrix.com

d <http://lt.msu.edu>

e <http://iteslj.org>

f www.awej.org

iii. **The library:** Familiarize yourself with the selection of books in the relevant section of your university library, whether this is applied linguistics, translation, literature or education. Using the catalogue will help you discover what the library holds. You might find it most useful to search the catalogue using keywords in the 'subject' field (just one keyword – not combinations), or you can search using the author's surname or the title of the book if you know them. The librarians are trained to help you search for material and they can show you how to use the catalogue.

Browsing the library shelves can be very rewarding and will likely lead to the discovery of items that your catalogue searches did not reveal. Check the contents page and the index of promising-looking books for terms pertinent to your study. Frequently, a book may contain relevant information about your topic even if the book title did not signal this. Try to browse the shelves at least once a week while you are planning your study. To find print resources efficiently, first identify the major concepts and terms, i.e. *key terms*, that you will use to conduct your search.

Remember that, it will be easy to locate relevant sources using:

- ☞ Using the library's online catalogue
- ☞ Using periodicals indexes and databases
- ☞ Consulting a reference librarian

iv. **Periodicals:** A periodical is a source that publishes new content on a continuing basis, usually at regular intervals. Examples include journals, newspapers, magazines, and blogs. The most common type of periodical resource used in academic coursework is a journal article. Periodicals are regarded as important sources because:

- ☞ They are published frequently; so, they are the best sources for current information.
- ☞ Current events are usually discussed in' periodicals long before they become the subject of a book.
- ☞ Periodicals often contain information on the latest' trends, products, research and theories. Periodicals are the best source for ephemeral or' very specialized information.
- ☞ Periodicals exist for every field and every interest,' providing access to a variety of hard-to find information. Due to the shorter length of periodical articles, more' topics may be covered within one volume of a periodical than in one book.

v. **Scholarly publications (Journals) :** A scholarly publication is one type of periodicals. It contains articles written by experts in a particular field. The primary audience of these articles is other experts. These articles generally report on original research or case studies. Many of these

publications are "peer reviewed" or "refereed". This means that scholars in the same field review the research and findings before the article is published. Articles in scholarly publications, in most cases:

- ☞ are written by and for faculty, researchers, or other experts in a field
- ☞ use scholarly or technical language
- ☞ include a full bibliography of sources cited in the article
- ☞ are often peer reviewed (refereed)

vi. **Popular sources (News and Magazines):** There are many occasions on which reading articles from popular sources can help to introduce you to a topic and introduce you to how that topic is being discussed in society. Articles in popular sources, in most cases:

- ☞ are written by journalists or professional writers for a general audience
- ☞ written in a language that is easy to understand by the general public
- ☞ rarely have a bibliography - rather, they are fact-checked through the editorial process of the publication they appear in
- ☞ don't assume prior knowledge of a subject area - for this reason, they are often very helpful to read if you don't know a lot about your subject area yet
- ☞ may contain an argument, opinion, or analysis of an issue

vii. **Books / Book Chapters:** Many academic books will be edited by an expert or group of experts. Often, books are a good source for a thorough investigation of a topic. Unlike a scholarly article, which will usually focus on the results of one research project, a book is likely to include an overview of research or issues related to its topic.

viii. **Conference proceedings:** Conference proceedings are compilations of papers, research, and information presented at conferences. Proceedings are sometimes peer-reviewed and are often the first publication of research that later appears in a scholarly publication (see above!). Proceedings are more commonly encountered (via databases and other searching) in science and engineering fields than in the arts and humanities.

ix. **Government Documents:** The Government Printing Office disseminates information issued by all three branches of the government to federal depository libraries (including NMSU). Additionally, the many departments of the government publish reports, data, statistics, white papers, consumer information, transcripts of hearings, and more. Some of the information

published by government offices is technical and scientific. Other information is meant for the general public.

x. **Theses and Dissertations:** Theses and dissertations are the result of an individual student's research while in a graduate program. They are written under the guidance and review of an academic committee but are not considered "peer-reviewed" or "refereed" publications

Homework

-Choose one topic and use keywords to look for 3 or 4 articles that seem to be relevant and name the journal (s) where you find these articles.

-Find the journal TESOL Quarterly. What sort of topics can you read about in this journal?

-Find the journal Language and Society. You can guess the topics you can read about in this journal from the title, but does this journal have an article that talks about your country or region? Do a search to see what results.

4) Recording Bibliographic Information

As you begin to find academic sources for your work, make a habit of noting down the relevant bibliographic information. Don't wait until you start to write up your list of references; by that time you will have forgotten where you found material and you most likely won't have all the details you need to include for each item. While it is usually possible to check incomplete bibliographic references by searching for the item on the Internet, it is still advisable to record the complete reference at the start. This is the information you will need to record:

Author or editor: Some articles or books may have more than one author; you need to record all names. Some books may be edited volumes. This means that the book contains chapters by different authors; the editor is the person responsible for assembling and revising the whole work, but he/she may also have authored one (or more) of the chapters. If you use a chapter from such a book, you must note both the name of the editor and the author. If you are using a document from the Internet, it may not necessarily be clear who the author is. Look for the name of the institution. Use this in

place of the author's name. If the document has no author and there is no name of an institution, this is probably a sign that it is not an appropriate bibliographic reference for your research.

Title: Some articles or books may have a long title. Note down the complete title. If it is an edited work, you need the title of the book and the title of the chapter(s) you use. Most documents you use from the Internet will also have a title. Again, if there is none, this is probably a sign that it is not an appropriate bibliographic reference for your research.

Year, publishing company, page numbers; volume and issue number: The year of publication is provided on almost all published material. If it is a book, convention requires that you also record the city where it was published; this is usually printed on one of the first pages of the book (ask your supervisor or a librarian if you can't find it). For chapters from an edited volume, the page numbers of the chapter are needed. For a journal article, record the page numbers of the complete article, together with the journal's volume number and issue number (if they exist).

References

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- 2) Rao, P. M. & Reddy, P. (2018). Importance of Periodical Literature in Research. *International Journal of Library and Information Studies* Vol.8(2), 256- 260
- 3) Ryan, E. (2022). *Types of Sources Explained | Examples & Tips*. Scribbr. Retrieved from <https://www.scribbr.com/working-with-sources/types-of-sources/>
- 4) <https://researchguides.uoregon.edu/getting-started>
- 5) <https://opentextbc.ca/writingforsuccess/chapter/chapter-7-sources-choosing-the-right-ones/>
- 6) <https://opentextbc.ca/researchmethods/chapter/reviewing-the-research-literature/>
- 7) <https://csus.libguides.com/APAstyle/periodicals>
- 8) <https://research-methodology.net/research-methodology/literature-review-sources/>