

University Library: Skills for Researchers

Guide to Writing a Literature Review for Doctoral Students

An essential part of a thesis is the literature review, which can either be a standalone chapter or part of the introduction. It is where you must discuss and review the studies, perspectives, theories and bodies of work relevant to your research question(s) and, in the process, demonstrate the gaps or shortcomings in previous research that your work will fill. In this way, it justifies the research that your thesis goes on to discuss and positions it within the wider body of literature.

It is often useful to write two versions of the literature review – one at the beginning of your studies, and a revised version at the end. Initially, you may find it helpful to write a draft literature review as you begin to read around your topic in more detail and get a sense of the field. When you return to the review at the end of your research, you will have a more sophisticated understanding of the area and will be able to critique and evaluate previous work in a more authoritative and detailed way.

The literature review must do two key things:

- It must ‘demonstrate an understanding of both the previous research and general writings that are relevant to your research area’
- It must ‘demonstrate to the examiners your ability to critically integrate and evaluate this literature’ (Steane, 2004, p. 124).

Deciding on texts for inclusion

The amount of literature published on your topic may seem overwhelming at first, and you may be unsure about how many texts to cover. You will most likely want to include a text if:

- It deals with a theory that underpins your work
- It makes a definitive statement about an aspect of your study
- It deals with your subject area or overlaps it
- It shows your acknowledgement of the work of others
- It assists in the maintenance of a coherent argument
- It puts your work into an external context
- It defines the current state of research in your area (Brewer, 2009, p. 139).

It can also be helpful to start by identifying the main studies or texts that are most similar to your area of interest or approach and work outwards from there, deciding on a cut-off point at which work becomes too distant or dated to include.

Being critical

It is important that your literature review critically evaluates the research that it covers; it shouldn’t simply describe other people’s work. It is therefore necessary to think critically about the literature as you read and make notes that are analytical rather than descriptive. Consider:

- Who is saying this?
- Why are they saying it?

- What is the basis on which they are saying it?
- Is this basis sound?
- What is the particular perspective from which the subject is approached?
- What have others said about this work?
- How does what it says relate to your research question or problem? (Brewer, 2009, p. 138).

Remember that being “critical” does not mean “criticising” – you are evaluating the literature, and should aim to act as a ‘dispassionate investigator’ rather than trying to identify faults in everything you read (Steane, 2004, p. 135).

Structure

Once you are ready to start writing, it is vital to think about how you will structure your literature review, otherwise there is a risk that it will become a loose sequence of summaries rather than an integrated and logical overview of existing work. If you don’t find that a structure develops organically, you could try following these suggestions:

- Chronologically: this can sometimes be a restrictive or overly-simple way of presenting the final version of a literature review, but in your first drafts it may help to arrange the literature chronologically and trace threads, associations and connections throughout.
- Thematically: you might discuss the literature in relation to themes within your research, or draw out comparable themes in the work you have read; take care if you use themes and sub-themes to put in clear ‘signposts’ when moving between them.
- The wheel: if you draw on research from different disciplines, you might be bringing together different topics or literatures that converge as part of your research – discussing these in a review will involve connecting these different elements (or ‘spokes’ of the wheel) and showing how they meet in relating to or supporting your research.
- The pyramid: you might want to start with a broader overview of relevant literature, before narrowing towards discussing the texts or studies closest to your own topic.
- Structure it around your main research questions and look at how others have addressed these (Thomson, 2016).

Once you start writing, remember to try to avoid description and work in your own evaluation and analysis of the texts, to ensure the examiners can hear your “voice”. Reading book reviews in journals can help to identify a formal and academic reviewing style if you are unsure how to begin.

References

Brewer, R. (2007) *Your PhD thesis: how to plan, draft, revise and edit your thesis*. Abergele: Study Mates.

Steane, P. (2004) ‘Fundamentals of a literature review’, in Steane, P. and Burton, S. (eds). *Surviving your thesis*. London: Routledge, pp. 124-137.

Thomson, P. (2016) *Five ways to structure a literature review*. Available at:

<https://patthomson.net/2016/08/29/five-ways-to-structure-a-literature-review/> (Accessed 2 September 2021)



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