



NTU Library

How to approach a Literature Review

What is a literature review?

The task of writing a Literature Review is a complex one involving focused literature searches, synthesis of ideas and identifying gaps in the literature for further study.

“A literature review is an assessment of a body of research that addresses a research question. It identifies what is already known about an area of study and identifies questions a body of research does not answer.”

(Harvard Graduate School of Education 2016)

- A literature review is a survey of publications, for instance: books, journals, authoritative websites, government documents and conference papers, reporting on relevant research and current practices within the broad topic of your report.
- Your literature review should only include studies that have direct relevance to your research.
- A literature review should be written in the form of an essay, with an introduction, main body of paragraphs grouped into themes, and a conclusion.
- The introduction to the review should situate your research within the broader context, outlining the main issues and areas for debate relating to your topic.
- The main body should be written in paragraphs grouped into themes, giving a critical summary of other pieces of work and showing their relevance to your own research.
- The conclusion should show how the review has informed your research, noting areas you'll be building on, and gaps you'll be filling.

Evaluating your sources

Ensure the literature is:

- Current, unless using seminal works
- Reliable
- Authoritative
- Accurate
- Purposeful

This will lend weight and credibility to your work. The insight of Sir Isaac Newton demonstrates this idea:

If I have seen further than others, it is through standing on the shoulders of giants!

(Newton 1676)

Use critical thinking to choose relevant, reliable resources from a selection of different sources.

Explain why it is the best resource using a table to analyse and evaluate.

Summarising your readings

A table can help you to gain an overview and closer understanding of the related themes within the studies. This stage is quite descriptive (Aveyard, 2007, p. 112).

Author/ date	Theme	Type of study/ info	Main findings/ conclusions	Strengths/ limitations
Brown/ 2006	Exploring student views of campus life	Questionnaire	35% of students preferred campus-based universities	Random sample of students not obtained. Very low response rate
George/ 2005	Expressing opinion on campus life	Expert opinion	Campus-based universities prevent integration into the community	Anecdotal opinion only

Features of a literature review?

What it is:	What it is not:
<p>A critical appraisal and synthesis of the literature which discusses how themes identified within recent, relevant research, relate to your own research area.</p> <p>It is good practice to discuss broad issues first, followed by a more focused study of the area of your research.</p>	<p>A library catalogue of material published on a particular topic:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Price and White (2007) stated this while Green and Smith (2006) maintained this. However, Brown (2009) asserted that ...</i>

Getting down to writing

The point is to:

- Identify the main themes within the literature
- Gather, synthesise, analyse and evaluate the information
- Demonstrate a *critical* knowledge of what is already known
- Present it in a formal, academic style with referencing
 - <http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/>
- Keep referring back to your title and research questions to ensure your writing is relevant.

Activity

- Read the first 5 paragraphs of the article: *An Analysis of Offending by Young People Looked After by Local Authorities* (Darker et al. 2008), and consider whether it is a well-written example of a literature review.
- In each case identify the features discussed :
 - Themes
 - Synthesis, analysis, evaluation
 - Criticality
 - Formality
 - Relevance to title
 - . . .

An Analysis of Offending by Young People Looked After by Local Authorities.

So, why is it well written?

- Aims of the literature review are clearly stated.
- Similar topics are grouped together into themes so there is no repetition.
- Each paragraph has a clearly identified topic sentence which provides an overview of key evidence and also correctly cites sources.
- Adheres to academic style – 3rd person, choice of formal language, subject specific terms, referencing.
- Identifies gaps in the research which provide a basis for this project.
- Provides data and statistics which lend validity.
- Uses reliable, peer-reviewed, academic sources.
- Follows paragraph structure: Claim; Evidence; Analysis; Evaluation.
- Uses linking words to show logical progression: However; Although.



It's good to talk

If you require further information or additional support, then email libinfodirect@ntu.ac.uk or book an appointment with a member of the Learning and Teaching Team:

<http://librarybookings.ntu.ac.uk/>

References

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