

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Julian Teicher

Overview of learning outcomes

1. Establish the nature and purposes of a literature review
2. Understand the types of literature reviews and their purposes
3. Develop the capability to structure a literature review in your chosen area of study
4. Gain an understanding of the elements of a good literature review; eg how to achieve credibility
5. Begin to develop the skills in researching and writing a literature review

What is a literature review?

- ▶ An attempt to provide a summary account of the state of knowledge in a given field or discipline
- ▶ It is more than a summary or an 'annotated literature review' but this will be an input
- ▶ Subsidiary question: what sources inform a literature review OR put another way 'what is literature'?
 - Journal articles
 - And...
- ▶ To some extent the answer depends on the purpose and the nature of the field of inquiry
- ▶ 'The main aim in structuring your review of the literature is to lead your reader to the point where he/she can see no other option than the need to conduct precisely the form of research you are proposing.'

What is a literature review?

- ▶ **One definition:**
- ▶ *It describes, compares, contrasts and evaluates the major theories, arguments, themes, methodologies, approaches and controversies in the scholarly literature on a subject.*
- ▶ *It also connects, compares and contrasts these arguments, themes and methodologies etc., with the concerns of a proposed piece of research (that is, the aims of the essay, research project or thesis, the research questions, and the central hypothesis). ECU Literature Review, Academic Tip Sheet*

What is a literature review?

- ▶ **Two Images**

- Funnel
- Eyes of a film director

- ▶ **long shots** to provide a solid sense of the background
- ▶ **middle distance shots** where the key figures and elements to be examined are brought clearly into view
- ▶ **close-up shots** where the precise focus of your work is pinpointed

How many different types of literature review can you identify and what are their attributes?

- ▶ **In a journal article** – no room for the whole story but has to be:
 - Focused on the topic at hand
 - Capture key contributions
 - Set the scene for the study by identifying a gap
 -
- ▶ **In a thesis**
 - Sometimes consumes a large part of the thesis
 - May provide background information
 - Review of relevant theories or concepts
 - Could provide an account of political and economic developments
 - Reviews research findings, methods etc
 - ,,,,

How many different types of literature review can you identify and what are their attributes?

- ▶ **In a report**
 - Identifies gaps in the knowledge
 - Scopes out the problem
 - Provides necessary background
 - ...
- ▶ **A task in itself: write a literature review identifying major concepts and ideas in relation to the development of the theory of the firm; eg a journal article**
 - Give some examples of literature reviews that may be written as journal articles?
 - Name some journals that specialise in or include literature reviews

Example: International Journal of Management Reviews?

- ▶ Guidance notes for authors list ‘**key criteria**’:
 1. Is there sufficient literature to warrant a survey; ie is the field mature enough?
 2. Is the literature surveyed coherently bounded; ie is there a rationale for what is included or excluded?
 3. Is the literature surveyed ‘complete’ in the sense of being up to date. In particular are the relevant areas of agreement and disagreement in the literature clearly identified? And why can we be confident in the coverage of the field?
 4. Does the review provide reasoned (not necessarily the correct) conclusions about the state of development of the field (where it is; what is missing; where it should be heading; what are the important contributions or contributors?)
 5. What is the audience and is it pitched at the right level (not too hard or easy)?

What are the purposes of a literature review?

- ▶ More than a collection of summaries or an elaborated annotated bibliography
- ▶ Hart (1998) defines it thus:
 - “the use of ideas in the literature to justify the particular approach to the topic, the selection of methods, and demonstration that this research contributes something new”
 - “quality means appropriate breadth and depth, rigor and consistency, clarity and brevity, and effective analysis and synthesis”
- ▶ Shaw (1995):
 - the process of the review should “explain how one piece of research builds on another”
- ▶ Webster and Watson (2002):
 - one that “creates a firm foundation for advancing knowledge. It facilitates theory development
 - closes areas where research is well developed (questions are answered) and identifies gaps where research is needed

A perspective on the purposes of a literature review (Levy & Ellis)

1. Helping the researcher understand the existing body of knowledge including where excess research exists (i.e. what is already know?) and where new research is needed (i.e. what is needed to be known?)
2. Providing a solid theoretical foundation for the proposed study (related to “what is already known?”)
3. Substantiating the presence of the research problem (related to “what is needed to be known?”)
4. Justifying the proposed study as one that contributes something new to the BoK
5. Framing the valid research methodologies, approach, goals, and research questions for the proposed study

What are the purposes of a literature review?

- ▶ Demonstrates your ability to identify relevant information and to outline existing knowledge.
- ▶ Shows readers you are familiar with significant and/or up-to-date research relevant to the topic
- ▶ Identifies the 'gap' in the research that your study is attempting to address, positioning your work in the context of previous research and creating a 'research space' for your work.
- ▶ Produces a rationale or justification for your study.
- ▶ Establishes the importance of the topic
- ▶ Justifies your choice of research question, theoretical or conceptual framework, and method
- ▶ Provides background information needed to understand the study
- ▶ Establishes your study as one link in a chain of research that is developing knowledge in your field

What are the purposes of a literature review?

- ▶ Methodologically analyse and synthesize quality literature
- ▶ Provide a firm foundation to a research topic
- ▶ Provide a firm foundation to the selection of research methodology
- ▶ Demonstrate that the proposed research contributes something new to the overall body of knowledge or advances the research field's knowledge-base.
- ▶ Justifying the proposed study as one that contributes something new to the BoK

How will discipline influence the exposition?

- ▶ Conventions will differ; eg use of voice, whether to cite chronologically
- ▶ Easier to stay in a single discipline when researching a literature review but sometimes the question calls for you to cross discipline boundaries
- ▶ Handling different disciplines or even streams of literature (concepts, theories, constructs) may warrant either separate literature reviews or separation within a literature review

Writing a literature review

- ▶ Organisation or structure needs to be apparent to the reader
- ▶ There should be a logic to that structure
- ▶ Some options are:
 - Chronological in terms of historical developments
 - 'classic' or benchmark studies in the field
 - Thematic
 - Reverse pyramid leading to increasing specificity and focus on RQs
- ▶ The importance of 'voice' and the risk of losing it

Writing: Questions to ask yourself when commencing a literature review

- ▶ What has been done in this field of research?
What principles of selection are you going to use?
- ▶ How will the discussion be ordered?
 - Chronologically
 - Thematically
 - Conceptually
 - Combination
 - What section headings will you use?
- ▶ How do the various studies relate to each other?
 - What precise contribution do they make to the field
 - What are their limitations
- ▶ How does your own research fit into what has already been done?

Writing: Fitting the literature into your research – more than an annotated bibliography

- ▶ Concept centred not author centred – more than a list of papers
- ▶ Keep asking how is the literature relevant to my study?
- ▶ Do the sources confirm the existence of the problem under investigation?
- ▶ How does my study relate to the larger literature?
- ▶ Moreover, use of literature should provide the grounds for legitimization of the research questions proposed in the study as well as validating the approach proposed by the study.

Writing: Establishing your credibility to a sceptical audience

1. Demonstrating knowledge

- ▶ Present your own carefully considered ideas about a subject so showing that you are an authority
- ▶ **How would you do this?**
 - Present multiple sources to support a point
 - Correctly identify key contributions
- ▶ Questionable sources, inaccurate (or missing) documentation, and factual errors can undermine your credibility

2. Maintain a reasonable tone

- ▶ Use moderate language and qualify judgements
- ▶ Avoid absolute statements because they suggest a degree of certainty that is dubious in reality

Establishing your credibility to a sceptical audience

3. Present as someone worth listening to

- ▶ Avoid being apologetic

4. Be fair and honest

- ▶ Avoid selective use of evidence; eg do not claim 'the bulk of evidence supports this view' if you have only one source
- ▶ Avoid quoting out of context
- ▶ Do not use evidence selectively, ignoring that which does not suit your case
- ▶ Avoid the use of unfair appeals to logic (logical fallacies) or emotion (eg playing to the prejudices of the reader)

Steps in the writing process – not necessarily sequential

1. Identify your research questions

- ▶ Essential in helping you direct and frame your reading.
- ▶ Difficult if you have not done the reading

2. Identify and locate appropriate information

- ▶ Searches include library catalogues, databases, CD ROMs, media releases, etc
- ▶ What you search for will depend on your discipline
- ▶ Other sources????

▪

Steps in the writing process – not necessarily sequential

3. Read and critically evaluate the information that you locate

- ▶ Examine its strengths and weaknesses in relation to your research
- ▶ Take notes of not only the information that you read, but also your thoughts about this information (have a wide margin or column for comments)

4. File and store your readings and notes

- ▶ No one 'right' way of organising your materials

5. Plan, organise and write critically about the literature

- ▶ Planning may be done diagrammatically and is key to how the literature review will be organised

Writing: Selecting appropriate source material

To limit the scope of your work you need to make judgements on the basis of

1. Relevance and focus

The topic is a sub-set of the field and that is the basis for deciding relevance

It should contribute to the development of the topic, clarify your position, provide an alternative point of view that you wish to argue against or provide a useful primary source material (ECU)

2. Authority

Sometimes difficult to know what to include but broadly it is peer reviewed or published by a reputable publisher

Would scholars typically accept this source?

Wikipedia is not reliable!

3. Currency

Not necessarily recent but still influential

Topic may be historical

Aspects of writing

▶ Citing

- Author prominent or information prominent – sometimes driven by the discipline

▶ Use of tenses

- present tense is used for:
 - a generalisation (in overviews, statements of main points, etc.) or a generally accepted scientific fact
 - a statement made by you as a writer
 - a statement reporting the position of a writer and your support or lack of support for this position
- past tense is used to:
 - describe the contents, findings, or conclusions of past research and is often referred to as the 'reporting' tense

Aspects of writing

- ▶ **The use of quotations:**
 - paraphrase preferred
- ▶ **Direct quotations are commonly used to highlight:**
 - author's definitions of important terms
 - illustrative examples of an author's specific view, difficult to paraphrase
 - particularly well-expressed opinions, revealing insights which a paraphrase could not capture
- ▶ **Words used to indicate your own position?**
 - eg disregarded, overlooked, neglected
- ▶ **Reporting words?**
 - words that comment on other works but reveal a critical stance/your position
 - Eg it is assumed

Aspects of writing

- **The present perfect tense is used to:**
 - indicate that research in the area is still continuing, or that the research has immediate relevance today; eg “*Several researchers **have studied** distributed database design*”
 - generalise about past literature
 - present a view using an information–prominent citation; eg “*The services that **have been identified** for the future B-ISDN include [7] [77] [78]*”
- ▶ **Active or passive voice**
 - Passive voice is problematic because the agent is unclear – the focus is on things not people
 - It is economical on the use of words
 - Example: ‘In the past services were provided...’ or ‘The services provided by companies were’

Aspects of writing

- ▶ Categories of reporting words and what they indicate (EXAMPLES PLEASE)
 - **Group 1** Author's argument – author making a point to develop or justify his/her argument
 - **Group 2** Author's emphasis –author drawing reader's attention to a particular point
 - **Group 3** Author's references to other authors –author positioning him/herself against other authors
 - **Group 4** Author's omissions –author not fully arguing a point
 - **Group 5** Author's admissions –author conceding a point of potential weakness

In conclusion: What is a good literature review?

- ▶ Again the answer will be determined by the purpose
- ▶ Define the topic appropriately/narrowly – avoid writing a history of the world
- ▶ Consider disciplinary boundaries
 - Cross discipline is fashionable but challenging
- ▶ Think about the audience
 - Perhaps cite potential examiners, referees
 - Literatures and topics are differently conceived in different places; eg diversity management is fast becoming extinct in the US
 - The broader the topic the greater the required scholarship
- ▶ What are the major propositions or areas of agreement in this field and who are the main contributors? Why are these findings important?
- ▶ Identify the gaps in the literature that need to be filled by you or someone else

In conclusion: What is a good literature review?

- ▶ What are the shortcomings in the literatures; eg weaknesses in the design of experiments
- ▶ Bring out divergences in the thinking in the field eg voice and attempt to identify the reasons eg experimental designs, sample
- ▶ The structure of the review, particularly in a thesis or journal review, should provide a roadmap to the review; eg time periods, contributions from different disciplines eg HK
- ▶ Utilise appropriate devices to economically present the literature; eg
 - Charts listing major papers and key findings
 - Diagrams illustrating major areas of development in the literature
 - Meta analyses
 - Figures illustrating theories or concepts and key sources
- ▶ Remember there is no one right way; eg some list major propositions. The structure and presentation should arise sensitively from the literature itself.

Pitfalls and traps

1. Failing to read the original and still citing the original

- Dishonest and likely source of error

2. Excessively long quotes form sources

- Keep them short
- Extract key propositions
- Paraphrasing a source or multiple sources in your own words is the key

3. You are not writing 'War and Peace':

- The skill is in being succinct and using the literature to serve your own purposes
- Some are very short

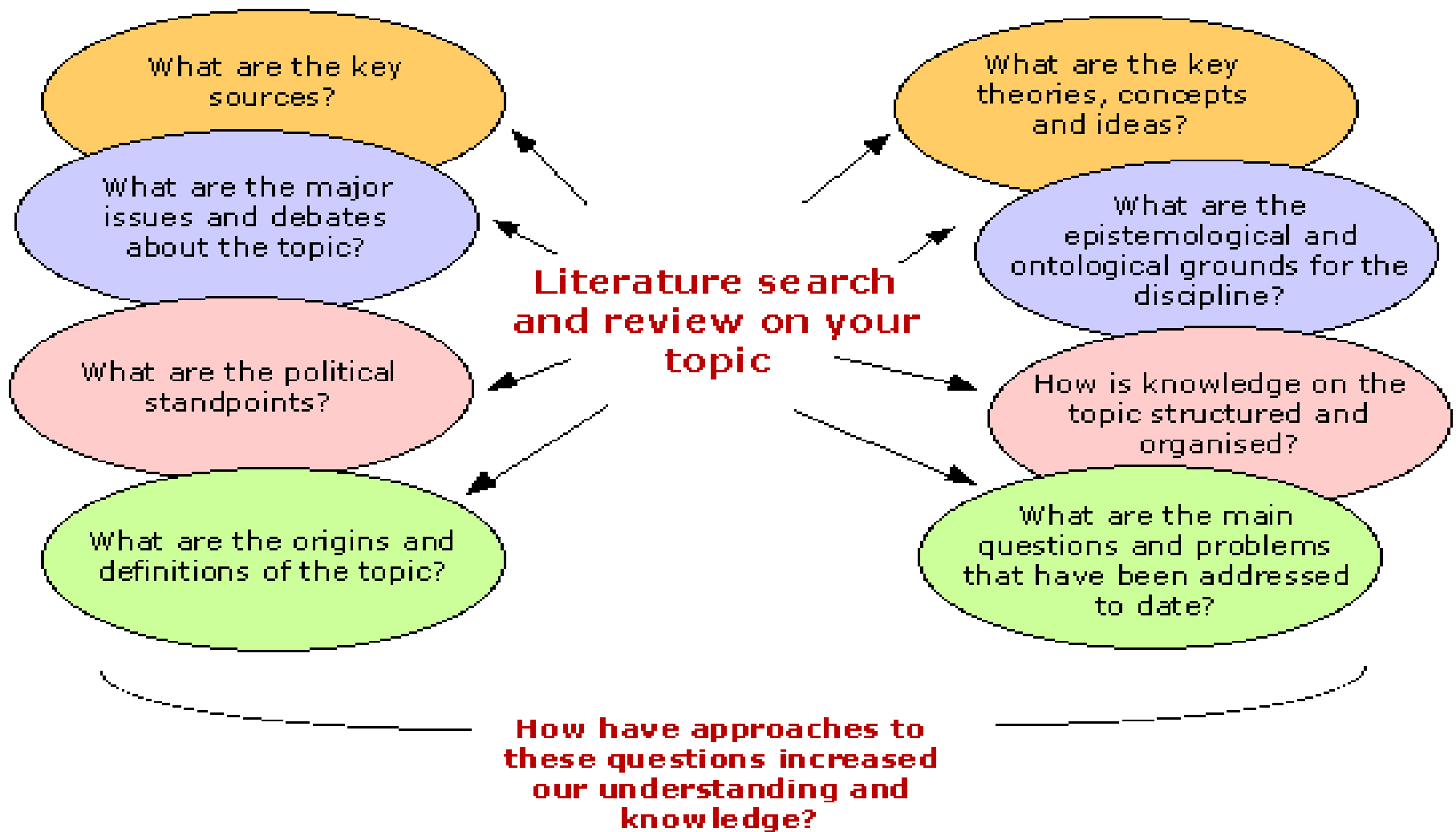
Pitfalls and traps

4. Intellectual pretentiousness

- Likely to antagonise the reader
- Makes the challenge harder
- The voice is humble; eg 'we could only identify a small number of studies...'

Group task

- ▶ Take one topic and plan how you will conduct the literature review:
 - Objective of the literature review
 - Do you know the RQs or will the literature review help frame them
 - Search terms
 - Sources to be consulted
 - Headings and sub-headings
 - How do you know when you have exhausted the search
 - What are your expected conclusions
 - How will it assist in your chosen research project



Some of the questions the review of the literature can answer

Adapted from Hart, C. (1998). *Doing a literature review: Releasing the social science research imagination*. London, Sage, p. 14.
Source: The Learning Centre UNSW <http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au>

References

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- ▶ The Learning Centre, UNSW, Getting started on your literature review.
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