

## Literature Review

### What is a literature review?

A literature review is an organization and evaluation of existing research that is relevant to a specific topic or subject area, and it is usually structured chronologically or thematically. The purpose of conducting a literature review is to convey to the reader knowledge and ideas established for a specific topic and to discuss their strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, a literature review provides the author with a useful background for further research on a particular topic by identifying gaps in the literature required for further study. An effective literature review must include an **overview**, a **summary**, and a **critique**. Literature reviews are used in a variety of academic writing, including research papers, honours theses, masters theses, doctoral theses, and other published works.

### Designing a literature review

- **Identifying a topic and searching for literature**
  - Before starting a literature review, it is necessary to have a well defined topic that is neither too broad nor too narrow. An overly broad topic will make a literature search difficult, as the broader the topic, the larger the volume of literature available. Conversely, for a too narrow topic, there may be very little literature with which to engage.
  - Once a topic is chosen, start by identifying literature related to that topic. The library has excellent tools to facilitate literature searches, such as subject specific databases, inter-library loan services, and knowledgeable staff to provide assistance with literature searches.
  - When conducting a literature search, it is often useful to read article and book reviews in the review sections of journals. Scanning through the table of contents of books and journals, as well as reading article abstracts, is another useful technique for identifying relevant literature.
  - Use literature that is up-to-date, peer reviewed, and published in reputable journals and other publications within your subject area. It is also important to identify scholars and authors that have had significant influence in the subject area and/or contributed knowledge or an idea that has furthered the understanding of the topic.
  - Start with the most current literature and work backwards so that the reference lists in current research can be used to identify earlier and influential literature in the topic.
  
- **Classifying the information**
  - Once the literature has been gathered, it will need to be organized and structured in a logical and orderly manner. There are several methods that can be used to organize literature. Generally, literature is classified into groups based on theories or similar methodological approaches. Literature can also be organized chronologically, but, if using this method, it is necessary to identify specific trends in literature that have evolved in specific periods of time.

- **Summarize**
  - It is important to summarize the literature, but the summary should not dominate the literature review. The purpose of the summary is to provide the reader with enough information to understand the main concepts of the literature being reviewed as it relates to the thesis topic.
- **Critique**
  - Critiquing the literature is the most important and often the most complex task in a literature review.
  - Critiques do not simply criticize literature. Literature can be criticized, but the criticism should be used to identify gaps or shortcomings in literature that requires further study. Ideally, these gaps will be explored more fully in the empirical section of the thesis.
  - Compare the literature to identify areas of debate, as well as agreement.

### Questions to Consider for a Literature Review

- What are the significant discoveries, key concepts, arguments, and/or theories that scholars have put forward? Which are the important works?
- On which particular areas of the topic has previous research concentrated? Have there been developments over time? What methodologies have been used?
- Are there any gaps in the research? Are there areas that have not been looked at closely yet, but which should be? Are there new ways of looking at the topic?
- Are there improved methodologies for researching this subject?
- How will my research build on or depart from current and previous research on the topic? What contribution will my research make to the field?

### Resources for Writing Literature Reviews

- Saint Mary's University Library Subject Guides
  - <http://www.smu.ca/administration/library/getstarted.html>. An excellent resource to use as a starting point for finding literature.
- Books
  - Galvin, J. L. (2006). *Writing Literature Reviews: A Guide for Students of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (third ed.). Glendale, CA: Pyczak Publishing.  
This book may be borrowed from the Saint Mary's University Writing Centre.
  - Hart, C. (1998). *Doing a literature review: releasing the social science research imagination*. London: Sage Publications.  
This book is available on Novanet through the Saint Mary's University Library.