Literature Reviews: An Introduction

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Literature Review: An Examination of the Key Research on a Topic

Seeks to answer the following questions:

- What have others said about this topic?
- What theories address the topic?
- What do those theories say?
- Which policies address the topic? (If relevant)
- What research has been done previously on the topic?
- Do the results of the existing research agree with one another, or is there disagreement?
- What are the gaps in the existing literature?

(Adapted from Davidson and Tollich, 1990, p. 94)

Different uses of literature review in assignments

- Review leading to research questions/hypotheses
- Review leading to conclusions on the topic (and recommendations)
- Review leading to new or adapted theoretical model or framework for new model

Review leading to research question(s)

- Previous research on the topic
  - Theories
  - Studies
  - Reviews
- What was studied?
- How was it studied?
- Findings?
- Comparison of findings
- Areas of agreement
- Areas of disagreement
- Contribution of the research
- Limitations of the research
- Gap(s) in the research

How your study addresses the gap(s)

- Positions your own research in the context of previous research on the topic
- Creates a space for your research
- Justifies your topic and your methodology

Review leading to conclusions on a topic

- Previous research on the topic
  - Theories
  - Studies
  - Reviews
- What was studied?
- How was it studied?
- Findings?
- Comparison of findings
- Areas of agreement
- Areas of disagreement
- Contribution of the research
- Limitations of the research
- Gap(s) in the research

Conclusions
(Recommendations)

Review leading to new/adapted theoretical model

- Previous research on the topic
  - Theories
  - Studies
  - Reviews
- What was studied?
- How was it studied?
- Findings?
- Comparison of findings
- Areas of agreement
- Areas of disagreement
- Contribution of previous models
- Limitations of previous models
- Way forward

New/adapted model or framework for model

- Critical overview of theoretical models and new research on topic
- Situates and justifies new/adapted model

- Provides reader with informed and supported conclusions on a topic
How is a literature review organised?

- by key themes or findings
- arranged in headings and sub-headings
- as an argument that flows
  - information from various sources is synthesised to form a coherent argument

Synthesise information on existing research

A literature review is not just a collection of summaries:

Research by Brown (2002)
Research by Smith (2005)
Research by Atken (2007)

Synthesise information on existing research on the topic

Where is your voice here? What is the point you're making about the topic in this paragraph?
Which issue does the research highlight?

Research by Brown (2002)

Where is your voice here? What is the relationship between Brown's research and Smith's research?

Research by Smith (2005)

Where is your voice here? What is the relationship between Atken's research and that of Brown and of Smith?

Research by Atken (2007)

How are all these linked to your research question?

Synthesise information on existing research

2. Restrictions on tobacco advertising

2.1. Tobacco advertising and smoking initiation

Several studies have shown that children are aware of cigarette advertisements and that they remember specific advertising manifestations (Altman et al., 1996; DiFranza et al., 1991; Hastings et al., 1994; Nelson & White, 1992), even children aged under 6 years (Fischer et al., 1991). For example, Hastings et al. (1994) showed that a campaign to promote Imperial Tobacco's "Regal" brand in the U.K. was getting through to children more effectively than it was to adults. It held much more appeal for teenagers than for adults. This study contributed to Imperial Tobacco being forced to withdraw this advertising campaign.

Your voice must guide the discussion

Critiquing existing research on the topic

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the existing research in relation to your topic?

- Contributions to the topic area
- Limitations in terms of the topic area
- What are the gaps in the research?

You're constructing an argument about previous research on the topic
Smith and Jones (2004) analysed the content of advertisements on New Zealand television during a two year period between the hours of 3pm to 6pm each day, with the intention of examining the nutritional quality of food in television food advertisements targeted at children. They found that the majority of the food advertisements analysed were for foods that were high in fat, sugars and sodium. The study provides a basis for comparing advertising patterns over time. However, it does not include any discussion of eating situations or eating behaviour as shown in the advertisements.

- Identify strengths and limitations in relation to your research
- You're constructing an argument about gaps in current knowledge—your voice must come through clearly in the review

**Methodological critique**

* Sample size
* Measures used
* Confounding variables
* Validity

See my notes on Writing a Critique

**Origins and definitions of the topic**

In order to study stress in teachers, a clear understanding of what is meant by the term ‘stress’ is needed... The word stress has become a word commonly used in a variety of settings, with different meanings attached to the situation in which it is used. Selye (1956), one of the pioneers in the field, introduced seminal texts that are, however, three general perspectives which have been identified. One is that stress is the result of something outside of the individual, i.e., external factors are the cause of stress; the second is that stress is internal, it is what goes on inside the individual as they interpret or react to what is going on around them (Gold & Roth, 1993); and the third major perspective is the transactional view of Lazarus and colleagues which focuses on the cognitive processes and emotional reactions of individuals to stress in their environment (Lazarus, 1978).
One of the most publicised definitions (Maslach, 1986), is that burnout is generally conceived to be a chronic response to extreme pressures and involves emotional exhaustion, feelings of low accomplishment and a depersonalisation of others in the work context – a tendency to treat them as objects rather than people...

A recent definition... Another distinct definition, by Freudenberger and Richelson (1980), describes burnout in terms of chronic fatigue, depression and frustration typically engendered by commitment to undertaking that did not realise the person's ambitions and expected rewards. Although this conceptualisation incorporates some of the elements of burnout, it is problematical because as O'Driscoll (2000) states, it confounds burnout with variables which are normally considered as distinct from, although related to, burnout, especially depression and chronic fatigue...

Despite the popularity of the stimulus approach, the stimulus model is not without its limitations. One is that stimulus events alone may be insufficient when predicting an individual's response. For example, two teachers subjected to loud, noisy classrooms may show quite different levels of strain, or may show strain at different times. Thus it fails to take account of individual differences, and it ignores the perceptual cognitive processes which underpin such differences (Cox & Fergusson, 1991).

Another criticism of this approach is that the response to a stressor must first be recognised before it can begin for the stimulus which preceded it, and the stimulus definition makes no mention of any intervening process (i.e. cognitive appraisal or coping efforts) that might exist (Ivanecvich & Matheson, 1980).
**Identify gaps in the research**

**Using negative openings:**
- However, little information
- However, few studies
- little attention
- few investigations
- little work
- few researchers
- little data
- few attempts
- little research

**Using contrastive statements:**
- The research has tended to focus on..., rather than on...
- However, much of the attention has been focused on X rather than Y.

**Raising questions, hypotheses or needs**
- If these results could be confirmed, they would provide strong evidence for...
- It would seem, therefore, that further investigations are needed in order to...

See Manchester University’s Academic Phrasebank (2006) for more examples:
Google: manchester university + academic phrasebank

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**Introducing your review**

- Be clear about the purpose of your review
- Establish the importance of your research topic
- Tell the reader how the review is structured

**Establish the importance of your research topic**

Provide specific evidence of the importance of the topic

**Example:**
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) has become the most widely diagnosed psychiatric condition among children in the United States. Estimates of the percentage of children with ADHD vary from study to study, ranging from two to nine percent, but it is generally accepted to affect five percent of the population under age 18 (Taylor, 2006).

**Example:** Point out the number or percentage of people or organisations affected by the problem

**Introducing your review**

**Be clear about the purpose of your review**

- What are you trying to achieve with your review?
  - clear aims in your introduction
- The rest of the review should realise these aims
- Keep going back to these aims
  - helps you to control your research
  - helps you to structure your review
  - helps you to decide what to include

(Adapted from Hart, 1998, p. 186)

**Introducing your review**

**Tell the reader how the review is structured**

*Sometimes presented as a short paragraph right at the beginning of the Literature Review chapter*

**Example 1:**
This chapter begins with a brief description of the nature of stress, the history and present status of stress, and differing perspectives and conceptual approaches. Secondly, the concept and definition of ‘burnout’ will be reviewed and theories, measures and correlates of burnout presented. Thirdly, there will be a more focused review specifically related to this study, presenting studies of teacher stress and burnout.

*Use structural cues throughout the review*

(Adapted from Whitehead, 2001, p. 12)
Concluding your Review

Come to conclusions about what you found in your review of the literature, leading the reader to:

- your research questions or hypotheses (first hand investigation) or
- a set of recommendations on the topic (review of studies) or
- a new or adapted theoretical model you’re proposing (theoretical review)

See peer reviewed journal articles for models of literature reviews

Deciding which literature is most pertinent to your review

Library searching - Online and hard copies:

- university databases
- use abstracts to help you in your search
- which authors and articles/books are cited most?
- make an appointment with a librarian for a research consultation

Make sure you follow guidelines in Course Guides for requirements

Presenting information and analysis

A range of formats can be used:

- Text
- Tables
- Diagrams

- Consult with your supervisor on appropriate formats
- See Emerson & Hampton, Chapter 9
- Examine other literature reviews
- Create templates according to the requirements of your course
  - presentation and referencing of texts, tables and diagrams
  - in-text references to texts, tables and diagrams
- See SLC’s notes on Research Reports for APA formatting

Help with literature review

- Online notes from Albany Centre for Teaching and Learning postgraduate webpage:
  Massey Homepage → Student Life → Albany Campus → Student Services → Student Learning Centre → Services
- Notes from Postgraduate Seminars: L. Sevillanno@massey.ac.nz
- One-to-one & small group consultations at Centre for Teaching and Learning
- DVD presentation: Thesis Toolkit - available from the Centre for Teaching and Learning


References


