

# LITERATURE REVIEWS

### Use this sheet to help you:

- understand the purposes of a literature review
- select and evaluate appropriate texts
- analyse texts in relation to your research objectives
- structure and write a literature review

## 5 minute self test

Read the following statements and identify if they are true (T) or false (F).

- T / F** A literature review should refer to all key literature in your field of study.
- T / F** A literature review should always identify a need for further research.
- T / F** A thesis statement is important to guide research for a literature review.
- T / F** A research question is important to guide research for a literature review.
- T / F** Literature which is not related to your research objective should be discarded.
- T / F** There is one widely-recognised, standard structure for a literature review.

**Check your answers on Page 7**

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## What is a literature review?

A literature review is the presentation, classification and evaluation of what other researchers have written on a particular subject. A literature review may form part of a research thesis, or may stand alone as a separate document. Although the second of these types of literature review is less extensive than that expected for a thesis, the skills required are identical.

A literature review is not simply a shopping list of what others have said. It does not and can not refer to every piece of literature in the field. Rather, a literature review is organised according to your research objective. It is a conceptually organised synthesis which ultimately provides a rationale for further research, whether by you or by others.

## The purposes and content of a literature review

**A literature review has multiple purposes. It should:**

- define and limit the problem you are working on
- place your study in a historical perspective
- avoid unnecessary duplication
- evaluate promising research methods
- relate your findings to previous knowledge and suggest further research

**A literature review must do more than describe. Rather, it may:**

- compare and contrast different authors' views on an issue
- group authors who draw similar conclusions
- criticise aspects of methodology
- note areas in which authors are in disagreement
- highlight exemplary studies
- highlight gaps in research
- show how your study relates to previous studies
- show how your study relates to the literature in general
- conclude by summarising what the literature says

(Caulley, as cited in Information Services, University Library, 2008)

## The research question

Two essential elements of all literature reviews (though they are not formally identified as such) are:

- 1) An outline what others have done in your chosen area
- 2) A progressive narrowing to the gap in the research

In a literature review, the work of others is used to cast the gap in relief (that is, to make it clear). The research question and thesis statement are then stated precisely before the remainder of the research project.

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It is necessary to review literature in order to eventually arrive at a research question and a thesis statement. But, importantly, the reverse relationship is also significant. In order to review the literature properly, it is necessary to look at it in light of your proposed research question, otherwise, a) you won't know what research is useful to read; and, b) the review will be a useless catalogue of unshaped ideas.

Any literature that does not have a bearing on your research question or proposed thesis statement should be discarded.

## Selecting texts

A literature review needs to demonstrate your ability to recognise relevant information. Remember, when reading your review, one should be able to identify key literature that exists and your informed evaluation of the literature. To do this, you must be able to:

- seek information: scan for literature efficiently using manual or computerised methods to identify a set of potentially useful articles and books.
- appraise information critically: apply principles of analysis when selecting and discussing texts.

### **12 questions can help you select, analyse and discuss each text critically.**

1. Has the author formulated a problem/issue?
2. Is the problem/issue ambiguous or clear? Is its significance (scope, severity, relevance) discussed?
3. What are the strengths and limitations of the way the author has formulated the problem or issue?
4. Could the problem have been approached more effectively from another perspective?
5. What is the author's research orientation (e.g., interpretive, critical science, combination) and theoretical framework?
6. What is the relationship between the research orientation and the theoretical framework?
7. Has the author evaluated the literature relevant to the problem/issue? Does the author include literature taking positions s/he does not agree with?
8. In a research study, how good are the three basic components of the study design? How accurate and valid are the measurements? Is the analysis of the data accurate and relevant to the research question? Are the conclusions validly based upon the data and analysis?
9. In popular literature, does the author use appeals to emotion, one-sided examples, rhetorically-charged language and tone? Is the author objective, or is s/he merely 'proving' what s/he already believes?
10. How does the author structure his or her argument? Can you 'deconstruct' the flow of the argument to analyse if/where it breaks down?
11. Is this a book or article that contributes to our understanding of the problem under study, and in what ways is it useful for practice? What are the strengths and limitations?
12. How does this book or article fit into the thesis or question I am developing?

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## Developing your position

It should be clear now that you need a rough statement of what you intend to accept or defend before you write your literature review, and preferably before you conduct extensive reading. As you read, you will need to refine and change this statement.

Often it is hard to tell if a particular writer agrees, disagrees or partly agrees with your position on a topic. This is usually not because the writer is unclear in their message, but because you have not developed a clear enough thesis statement yourself. In helping to decide whether the literature you are reading is useful to you or not, consider the following method. First, write your proposed thesis statement on the top of a piece of paper, then divide the page into six columns headed as follows:

YES	Yes, but	Yes, BUT	No, but	No, BUT	NO

"YES" indicates that the writer completely agrees with your proposed thesis statement. "Yes, but" indicates that they mainly agree with the statement but have minor disagreements. "Yes, BUT", indicates that the writer mainly agrees with the position you wish to defend, however he or she has some major disagreements. "No, but" indicates that they mainly disagree but also have minor agreements with some aspects of the statement, and so on.

Write where the authors agree or disagree under the columns, giving full citation information and page numbers so you don't forget later.

## Taking notes

Use the six columns and the questions presented above to take notes. This approach will ensure that your notes go beyond just being descriptive. Don't hesitate to note your personal responses to the texts as you read, even responses such as 'I can't understand this', or 'what is an example of this?'

## Structuring the review

Literature reviews can be difficult to structure, as the order in which you review the texts depends on your purposes. Do not attempt to create a structure for your review before you have brainstormed and have read some key texts. Only when you have "jumped in" to the research, should you then create an outline for your review, and only once this taken shape, should you begin writing.

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You may decide that one of the following means is the most logical way to structure the bulk of your review.

## **Difference of approach**

*'While Jones (1982) argues ... Smith (1990) claims that...'*

## **From distant to closely related**

*'Smith (1991) and Jones (2001) both show that ... However Hutchison (2002) demonstrates that ...'*

## **Chronologically**

*'Early marketing theory owes its development to ... Many studies contributed to ... for example, Jones and Smith (1986). Hunt (1987) was recognised for ... but later Jamison (1999) showed that ...'*

Whichever structure you use, remember that your review should be organised into useful, informative sections that present themes or identify trends (from Taylor, 2001).

## **Critical review language**

It is usually a bad sign when every paragraph of your review begins with the names of researchers. "Smith said ...", "Jones said ...", etc. Instead, use different ways of reporting data so that your literature review does not read like a shopping list ("Smith claims that ... Jones says that ..., etc):

Consider the following three styles:

### **Information prominent:**

*Research indicates that ... (Becker, 1997, p. 9) (usually present tense)*

### **Weak author prominent:**

*Research has shown...*

*Some have argued that ... (Becker, 1997, p. 9) (usually present perfect tense)*

### **Author prominent:**

*Becker (1997, p. 9) argues that ... (usually present tense).*

Use a range of "Critical Review Language" eg.

- *Becker rejects the idea that...*
- *Becker questions the idea that...*
- *Becker investigates the idea that...*
- *According to Becker...*
- *Becker undermines the position that...*
- *In Becker's view ...*
- *Becker's point seems to be that ...*

Of course, citations must always be added.

(See helpsheet: *Language for Citing* for further language and advice).

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## A final checklist

Before you submit your literature review to your supervisor or lecturer, consider the following questions (from Taylor, 2001):

- ☐ Do I have a specific thesis, problem, or research question which my literature review helps to define?
- ☐ What type of literature review am I conducting? Am I looking at issues of theory? methodology? policy? quantitative research (e.g., studies of a new or controversial procedure)? qualitative research (e.g., studies determining criteria for allocating health care resources)?
- ☐ What is the scope of my literature review? What types of publications am I using; e.g., journals, books, government documents, popular media? What discipline am I working in?
- ☐ How good are my information seeking skills? Has my search been wide enough to ensure I've found all the relevant material? Has it been narrow enough to exclude irrelevant material? Is the number of sources I've used appropriate for the length of my paper?
- ☐ Is there a specific relationship between the literature I've chosen to review and the problem I've formulated?
- ☐ Have I critically analysed the literature I use? Do I just list and summarise authors and articles, or do I assess them? Do I discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the cited material?
- ☐ Have I cited and discussed studies contrary to my perspective?
- ☐ Will the reader find my literature review relevant, appropriate, and useful?

## Example literature review (excerpt)

In the literature it is recognised that a dichotomy exists between agricultural and business marketing because the marketing management approach is not prominent in agricultural marketing theory. Bateman (1976) suggests that agricultural marketing has traditionally incorporated everything that happens between the farm gate and the consumer, therefore encompassing areas which 'the purist' may not consider marketing. While analysis of government intervention and policy form the focus of agricultural marketing theory, studies of the objectives and decisions confronting individual businesses are central to business marketing theory.

Muelenberg (1986) also identifies the gap existing between the two disciplines. He notes that agricultural marketing theory has not adopted the marketing management approach of business marketing theory or examined competitive strategy in the same way as business literature. According to Richardson (1986) the marketing management approach (which he refers to as the agribusiness concept) has "gained very little acceptance ... and no significant analytical or research results" in the area of agricultural marketing (100). However, it appears that parts of agricultural marketing theory seem to be moving towards the marketing management approach.

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Breimyer (1973) was the first to identify an agricultural marketing school of thought focusing on business marketing theory, and this school of thought seems to be growing more prominent. For example Watson (1983) acknowledges that during the 1970s a minor paradigm shift occurred in agricultural marketing with a move towards business marketing. He notes how successive editions of Kohl's agricultural marketing textbook (1972 and 1980) have changed to describe the marketing concept. Muelenberg (1986) points out a number of agricultural marketeers who have partially incorporated the marketing management approach, but mainly focus on the behaviour of agribusiness companies (e.g. Bresch 1981; Yon 1976), rather than individual farm firms.

Ritson (1986) argues that agricultural marketing theory should focus on government policy, because in European agriculture parts of the marketing mix which would normally be undertaken by individual businesses are controlled by the government. In some countries, marketing boards have exclusive control of the price, place and promotion of agricultural products. These organisations supposedly carry out many marketing management practices on behalf of business including farm firms.

Although central control or government intervention may limit the marketing options available to individual business, farm firms still have some control over their marketing mix and production decisions. The presence of government intervention or marketing activity does not preclude or excuse individual business firms from any marketing activity or strategic process associated with the market place. In business marketing theory the external environment has a major influence on the marketing activities of most firms.

The apparent differences between agricultural marketing and business marketing theories may not present a problem because both disciplines examine issues which are likely to require different theories and techniques for analysis. *However, concern must be expressed at the failure of researchers to comprehensive examine the marketing strategies undertaken by individual farm businesses.* Businesses in the agricultural sector include farmers and other often larger and more sophisticated agribusinesses, such as input suppliers and merchants. Business literature contains published articles examining the marketing strategies of large agribusiness companies; however, *little research appears to reach down to the farm business level.*

**\*\* Notice the "Gap" (italicised passages). Notice also how the research begins by focussing on the main topic area and then narrowing down to the gap in the research. The writer will then go on to formally state the research question and outline their thesis statement.**

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## Answers

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- T / F There is one widely-recognised, standard structure for a literature review.

## References

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McLeay, F. J. and Zwart, A.C. (1993). *Agricultural Marketing and Farm Marketing Strategies* Australian Agribusiness Review, Volume 1 No 1

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