Concluding Thoughts on Literature Reviews

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When you began looking through this book, you may have already been an accomplished researcher and writer. As a student, you may have had both research and writing experiences as an undergraduate that prepared you for your first graduate-level literature review. For most graduate students, however, many of the concepts and skills needed to successfully complete this high-stakes document will be new. And, while developing these skills is not always a linear process, the effort put into acquiring them will serve you throughout both your academic and professional life.

Here is a quick review of the main points from each of the chapters in this book:

1. The purpose of a literature review is to survey the current state of knowledge in the area of inquiry; to identify key authors, articles, theories, and findings in that area; and to identify gaps in knowledge in that research area. (Chapter 3.1)
2. Some common errors in many first-time literature reviews include:
    1. Accepts another researcher's finding as valid without evaluating methodology and data
    2. Neglects to consider or mention contrary findings and alternative interpretations
    3. Findings are not clearly related to one's own study or findings are too general.
    4. Allows insufficient time to define best search strategies and writing
    5. Simply reports individual studies rather than synthesizing the results
    6. Problems with selecting and using most relevant keywords and descriptors are evident.
    7. Relies too heavily on secondary sources
    8. Does not record or report search procedures
    9. Summarizes rather than synthesizes (Chapter 3.1)
3. By understanding what the literature in your field is, as well as how and when it is generated, you begin to know what is available and where to look for it. (Chapter 3.2)
4. Most graduate-level literature reviews begin with choosing a relevant, appropriate, interesting topic and then changing it. (Chapter 3.3)
5. Search and discovery of the literature is an iterative process. There are many places to look and many tools and techniques to use to find resources. Advanced researchers master this skill early on and refine it with each project. (Chapter 3.4)
6. You searched the literature and found lots of relevant resources. How do you now determine whether each item is an appropriate fit for your own review? (Chapter 3.5)
7. How will your resources be organized (alphabetically or chronologically)? By broad general theme or theory? Based on a type of methodology or population? What citation management program or software are you going to use to keep track of all your references? (Chapter 3.6)
8. Your literature review is not a summary of all the articles you read but rather a synthesis that demonstrates a critical analysis of the papers you collected as well as your ability to integrate the results of your analysis into your own literature review. (Chapter 3.7)
9. Like any effective argument, the literature review is about both content and form. It should have logical and smooth flow, a clear introduction and conclusion, and use a consistent citation style throughout. (Chapter 3.8)

Remember: Writing a good literature review takes time. Start early. Begin thinking about your topic and collect references even while you work on other tasks. Write a first draft and then revise. Go over the language, style, and form. Focus, sharpen, clarify, and search again. When you are satisfied with the result, you're done.

How is the literature review evaluated?

It is usually judged in three main areas:

1. Selection of the literature
    1. Have you clearly indicated the scope and purpose of the review?
    2. Have you included a balanced coverage of what is available?
    3. Have you included the most recent and relevant studies?
    4. Have you included enough material to show the development and limitations in this area?
    5. Have you indicated the source of the literature by referencing accurately?
    6. Have you used mostly primary sources or appropriate secondary sources?
2. Critique of the literature
    1. Have you clearly (and logically) ordered and sorted the research, focusing on themes or ideas rather than the authors?
    2. Does the review move from broader concepts to a more specific focus?
    3. Is there adequate critique of research limitations, including design and methodology?
    4. How do the studies compare or contrast with debates or controversies highlighted?
    5. Is the relevance to your problem clear?
3. Summary and interpretation of the literature
    1. Have you made an overall interpretation of what is available?
    2. Do the implications provide theoretical or empirical justification for your own research questions/hypothesis?
    3. Do the implications provide a rationale for your research design? (RMIT University)

We hope that this discussion about literature reviews is useful. After reading this guide, and reviewing the additional resources and activities in each chapter, we hope you have a better understanding of the research and writing process. What conclusions have you reached regarding the content and structure of a literature review that can answer the question, "How do I write a graduate-level literature review?"

Additional Resources

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