

Literature Review

A literature review has three primary functions.¹ It helps you to:

1. bring clarity and focus to your research problem;
2. improve your methodology; and
3. broaden your knowledge in your particular research area.

Bring clarity and focus to your research problem

The literature review involves a paradox. On the one hand, you cannot effectively undertake a literature search without some idea of the problem you wish to investigate. On the other, the literature review can play an extremely important role in shaping your research problem because the process of reviewing the literature helps you to understand the subject area better and thus helps you to conceptualize your research problem clearly and precisely. It also helps you to understand the relationship between your research problem and the body of knowledge in the area.

Improve your methodology

Going through the literature acquaints you with the methodologies that have been used by others to find answers to research questions similar to the one you are investigating. A literature review tells you if others have used procedures and methods similar to the ones that you are proposing, which procedures and methods have worked well for them, and what problems they have encountered. By becoming aware of any problems and pitfalls, you will be better positioned to select a methodology that is capable of providing valid answers to your research questions. This will increase your confidence in the methodology you plan to use and will equip you to defend its use.

Broaden your knowledge in your particular research area

The most important function of the literature review is to ensure you read widely around the subject area in which you intend to conduct your research project. It is important that you know what other researchers have found in regard to the same or similar questions, what theories and models have been put forward, and what gaps exist in the relevant body of knowledge. The literature review also helps you to understand how the findings of your study fit into the existing body of knowledge. Finally, a thorough literature review helps to ensure that you are an expert in your area of study.

¹ This information is taken from Kumar, Ranjit (1996). *Research Methodology: A Step-by-Step Guide for Beginners*. London: SAGE Publications.

The most difficult aspect of reviewing the literature is fighting the urge to merely summarize a bunch of journal articles and books. A good literature review provides readers with some context with which to view *your* work. This means that you have to make it clear *why* the papers and books that you have chosen to review are relevant to your project. I have posted several journal articles under 'Handouts' that do a good job of reviewing the relevant literature and providing context. Please take a look at these to see if they are helpful, but also realize that the literature reviews in the papers you are reading for your project will likely be your best guide.

The details of the assignment are as follows:

- Your review of the literature should cover a **minimum of 5 and a maximum of 10 sources**, where a source is a peer-reviewed journal article or book. Other references to popular press items (*i.e.*, a quote from the New York Times that proves that your research question is very timely and interesting) are certainly allowed but should not be counted as one of the 5 minimum sources.
- The paper that you turn in should be **3 double-spaced typed pages**. It should be turned in as an addition to your three-ring binder, which should include your Prospectus (Assignment #2). If you were asked to make changes to your Prospectus, an updated version of the Prospectus should also be in your binder by the time you turn in Assignment #3.
- On an additional page (not part of the 3 pages mentioned above), please make sure that all sources you cite are included on a References list that follows the APA Style format (see the relevant handout posted on the course website).
- **DO NOT PLAGARIZE.** Taking sentences directly from a journal article is unacceptable. While *quoting* with proper citation is allowed, this is not advised given that the point of the literature review is for **you** to restate what the author(s) did as it pertains to **your** project.

Some (hopefully) helpful hints:

- With every journal article or book that you uncover on your topic, you may find it helpful to answer the magic five questions (from Assignment #1) about each one. If you essentially replicate Assignment #1 for each potential source that you uncover, you will have a much clearer idea of which sources are crucial for you to include and which are less relevant.
- Some topics or methodologies will require you to provide some historical perspective. If this is the case, chances are good that one of the sources has already attempted to do this and you can use that source as a guide.
- As you start reading, you will soon discover that the problem you wish to investigate has its roots in a number of theories that have been developed from different perspectives. Sort the information in these sources into main themes and theories, highlighting agreements and disagreements (on each of the five questions, but particularly with regard to questions 3, 4, and 5). This approach will prevent you from just summarizing paper #1, then summarizing paper #2, then summarizing paper #3, ..., which *feels* right but is *not* the right approach.