WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW

This guidance note is based on material gathered and adapted from:

Bell, J. (1999), Doing Your Research Project (3rd edition), OUP, Buckingham
Blaxter et al. (2001), How to Research (2nd edition), OUP, Buckingham

What is a literature review?

A literature review summarises and evaluates existing work in a given topic area. It can be a study in itself or it can form part of an empirical research study, placing your own project in context.

A literature review can:

- provide insights into previous work
- help you to understand your topic better
- help you to avoid repeating research already done
- provide a foundation/framework for new research

It can identify:

- The origins and definitions of the topic
- Key sources, themes, concepts and ideas
- Main issues and debates about the subject
- Main problems and questions addressed to date
- Gaps in existing knowledge
- Political standpoints
- How knowledge on the topic is structured and organised

Guiding principles:

1. Approach with an active, questioning mind. Look for links between one piece of data and another. See each piece of data as an item in itself and part of a larger whole. Look for avenues where the information might be better explained, explored and understood.

2. Aim for a broad, balanced coverage – don’t just select material that agrees with you.

3. Try to be objective in choosing and handling the information you include. Explain why you have excluded certain material.
4. Be aware of how your personal perceptions, beliefs, values, attitudes, opinions, likes/dislikes and prejudices might influence your choice of content and the way you react to it.

5. Be aware of how the authors of the material you include might have been influenced by their own personal perspectives, beliefs etc. in the way they deal with the material. Try to read original sources for yourself. If this is not possible, treat secondary sources with caution: the more people between you and the original material, the more influences on it.

6. Represent authors’ work fairly, accurately and clearly:
   - Make sure you understand the original material.
   - When paraphrasing, be exact, accurate and clear.
   - Don’t use direct quotes out of context.
   - Don’t tag on personal remarks that could seem to come from the source.
   - Don’t condense so much that the true message is not reflected.
   - Avoid using jargon to “clarify”.
   - You can comment on but not change the message.
   - Take care when referring to several sources at once that you attribute the right information to the right source.
   - Be careful not to make false connections between different sources.

7. Aim for a coherent picture.

**Searching for Information:**

1. Summarise what you already know about the topic.
2. Talk to others who know about the topic to get some useful contacts.
3. Scan journals for recent publications – write to authors for information.

Questions to ask:

- What are the main current issues in the field?
- Do these have equally important contributions to make to extending knowledge/understanding of the subject?
- Is any one especially significant?
- What are the “seminal works” in the field?
- In any literature review of the field, what material could be considered essential to include?

4. Investigate the literature in the library:
   - Search catalogue using key words.
   - Search electronic subject resources:
     - databases (e.g. MEDLINE) for details of publications – start making a reference list.
- E-journals (e.g. Nursing Standard)
- E-books
- Gateways to Internet resources

- Seek out literature reviews - use their reference lists to expand your own.
- Pause periodically to track down promising references.
- Seek guidance on refining searches from librarians.

**Reviewing the material:**

Start reading from a basic, general level and work towards the more specific:

1. Textbook primer (introductory, overview text) for description of fundamental issues and explanation of subject.

2. Reference textbook for a more comprehensive, detailed coverage of the subject.

   Identify key, classic works: textbooks recognised as essential reading on the topic, especially where the author is still active in the field.

3. Research papers. Use their reference lists to expand your own.

   The inferences and conclusions of different researchers may offer useful insights into how the information can be approached and handled.

4. Critiques and commentaries – N.B. consider the context these are written in.

5. Publications by official bodies e.g. reports of statutory/voluntary bodies, government papers.

6. Feature articles.

Take notes as you read. Try using separate sheets of A4 for each source, divided up as follows:
**Full reference:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>This source</th>
<th>Other sources</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Note:</td>
<td>Compare the contents of column 1 for each piece of literature.</td>
<td>As you make notes in column 1, note thoughts here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facts, figures</td>
<td>Note: connections</td>
<td>After completing columns 1 and 2, go through all again and make more notes here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chronology of events</td>
<td>agreements/disagreements</td>
<td>What is important about the data?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>special emphases made by author</td>
<td>verification</td>
<td>What should you know/understand about it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comments</td>
<td>supportive statements</td>
<td>What does it contribute to the overall picture?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conclusions</td>
<td>dismissive opinion</td>
<td>Be brief, objective and to the point.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>references to other works in the field</td>
<td>Take information from each column 1 over into column 2 of all other pieces</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>essential/notable elements about the subject</td>
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<tr>
<td>constraints on/opportunities for research</td>
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<tr>
<td>perceptions expressed on consensus/disagreement</td>
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<tr>
<td>author’s recommendations for further study/investigation</td>
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<td>departures from accepted thinking</td>
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<td>innovations</td>
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<td>policy decisions as “rules” in public domain</td>
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Framework:

Abstract - A brief digest, conveying the main message clearly, concisely and accurately. Write after the first draft of the review.

Introduction - Identify/explain the topic and why you have selected it for review, e.g.:

- No literature reviews in the field.
- No recent reviews in an expanding field.
- A rapidly developing field with much literature regularly published.
- An innovation, sudden advance in knowledge, or a new perspective, requiring a different understanding of material in the field.

Presentation of data - Move from general background/standard theoretical works to more precise, recent works relevant to the topic. Identify salient issues.

Discussion - Comment on the material presented, identify issues. Do not introduce new material.

- Be cool, detached, balanced, objective and non-judgmental. Be rational - appeal to reason, not to the emotions. Do not be didactic - aim to illuminate the topic, not use it as a platform for fighting a cause.

Reference list.

Style and language:

- Use formal, plain English.
- Be concise and precise: use simple, straightforward sentences; avoid repetition and unnecessary padding; avoid vague generalisations.
- Be cautious: avoid expressions such as “always”, “never”, “undoubtedly”, “obviously”; make suggestions, refer to “possible” viewpoints.
- Avoid emotive, value-ridden language.
- Check grammar and syntax make clear the connections between ideas.