

DOING A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Anne B. Ryan

Introduction

This chapter provides guidelines for tackling the review of literature. After explaining what a literature review is it outlines:

- What to do when you think there is too much or too little literature;
- How to think about literature in terms of concepts, theories and ideas rather than topics;
- How to evaluate literature;
- The importance of writing.

Student Comment:

I see the literature review as a means of engaging with the reader of my thesis and providing him/her with the tools to navigate through my subject. In a manner of speaking ... to educate the reader so that he/she can join me on the journey through my thesis.

What is a literature review?

A literature review is an in-depth examination of the significant material in books, journals and other sources relating to your topic. The aim is to explore what is already known on the topic and to introduce the main thinkers/writers in the area. A review helps you and your readers to acquire an understanding of your topic. It sets the scene for your research, placing your research question in context. The review is therefore a part of your academic development – of becoming expert on your topic. It is usually presented at the beginning of a thesis, after the introduction, and generally takes up about a third to a half of the word allocation of the thesis. In short theses, this will probably be just one chapter, but in longer theses, the literature review runs to two, even three chapters. The best way to see how it is done is to look at other theses, which can be consulted in the university library.

A review helps you and your readers to acquire an understanding of your topic, of what has already been done on it, how it has been researched, and what the key issues are. You need to show that you have understood the main theories in the subject area and how they have been applied and developed, as well as the main criticisms that have been made on the topic. The review is therefore a part of your academic development - of becoming an expert on your topic.

The literature review is not a linear process. Rather, it is a backwards-and-forwards process between your reading and your writing. You read other people's work, and you write your evaluation of it, and discuss how it can help you to develop your research question. It is written before, during and after the other parts of your thesis. Start it as soon as you can, but don't consider it finished until the thesis as a whole is finished.

The four main functions of a literature review

1. It demonstrates the underlying assumptions behind the general research questions. It should demonstrate the stance of the researcher, and the values and politics s/he brings to the research.
2. It demonstrates that the researcher is knowledgeable about related research and theory.
3. It shows that the researcher has identified some gaps in existing work on the topic, or has singled out some element of existing work that s/he would like to develop or build on. It demonstrates that the proposed study will thus fill a demonstrated need.
4. It helps you refine and redefine the research questions, although the detail of this may not always be recorded in the review.

The main processes involved in a literature review

1. Finds out what is known about a topic.
2. Critically evaluates what is known.
3. Examines similar work that addresses the issues you are addressing.
4. Identifies gaps in what is known and shows how your work fills those gaps.
5. Identifies elements that you would like to build on, and discusses how you propose to do so and why.
6. Explains why your research is worth doing.

Your research questions are crucial to how you approach the literature. They constitute your agenda. They form the guide that leads you to examine closely some authors' work and leave aside that of others. You should constantly ask how a piece of literature is adequate or otherwise, in your search to answer or explore your specific questions. As part of this process, you will also refine your questions. *The whole process is cyclical, not linear.*

Finding out what is known about a topic

- Talk to your supervisor.
- Consult bibliographies and references in articles and books. Often, if you start with one good article, report or book, its reference section or bibliography will lead you to other writing on the topic.
- Consult reading lists for different modules on your course, if you are doing a taught course.
- Make an appointment with your subject librarian in the university library.
- Search the wide range of resources available via the Internet. Ask your subject librarian for advice on this and for assistance in this area.
- Consult internet news groups.
- Confer with fellow students and consult past theses which are available in the university library.

Check Chapter Three for more information on finding print and electronic material.

Summary checklist of questions to address when doing a literature review

- What are the key sources?
- What are the major issues and debates on my topic?
- What are the political standpoints?
- What are the origins and definitions of the topic?
- What are the key theories, concepts and ideas?
- What are the epistemological and ontological grounds for the discipline?
- What are the main questions and problems that have been addressed to date?
- How is knowledge on the topic structured and organised?
- How have approaches to these questions increased our understanding and knowledge?

There's too much literature!

It's easy to feel panic at the size of the body of literature you could read. Nobody is now expected to review the entire field. This is why you need to keep in mind your agenda, your research purpose, and your research questions. Even if these are not thoroughly defined at the outset, they will guide you to the pieces that are worth reading. In turn, the reading will refine the questions you are asking. You have to start somewhere, and your questions or specific topic will indicate this. Eventually, you will begin to see patterns, links, contradictions and variations in the literature, which you can use to structure your reading and subsequent writing.

There was a time when a student might have been expected to review the entire body of relevant literature in her or his field. This is no longer the case – most bodies of literature are simply too big. You have to decide which pieces of literature you will use and in order to do this, you should distinguish between the concepts of *totality* and *wholeness*. The literature review should be coherent, rounded and have a sense of wholeness. It should have a satisfactory beginning, middle and end and should make links between different authors, concepts and theoretical stances. This concept of wholeness is different from trying to cover all aspects of a topic, by reviewing the *total* field.

Coherence

The concepts of coherence and wholeness, as distinct from totality, are important to guide the overall thesis. No thesis can do everything; it is simply a link in the chain of knowledge. You have to construct it in a coherent manner so that it can stand by itself. At the same time you should be aware that your research cannot cover the total field. It is connected to past and future studies.

There's too little!

Don't make this assumption. There's usually something, even if some topics have smaller bodies of literature than others. You can use the sources named already (in *Where to find literature*) to find what has been written. You can also use the strategy of examining the literature you discover in terms of concepts rather than topics. This allows you to examine the literature from fields that may seem unrelated to yours but which, when examined from the point of view of concepts rather than topics, can yield interdisciplinary insights. And you can always make a lot out of a little, by engaging in a thorough critical review. For example, a student who was researching risk management in the Defence Forces found many useful concepts in the literature on risk and risk management that has emerged from research done in hospitals (Yorke, 2005).

Think about literature in terms of concepts, theories and ideas rather than topics

Whether there is a lot or a little written about your actual topic, it is worthwhile examining the topic through the lens of different concepts. For example, when one of us was asked to write about difference, immigration and minority groups in Ireland (Ryan, A.B. 1999), she approached the topic by asking what kinds of theoretical and political assumptions exist in the writing and practice that exists concerning them.

Anne writes:

I decided to explore the different concepts that policy makers and other citizens draw on when thinking about and acting on the issue. I started with ideas from two key texts: Stalker (1996) and Ryan, A. (1999). Both of these texts examine questions concerning human well being and what constitutes a desirable or good social order. As I considered their ideas and their applicability to the issue of difference in Irish society, other ideas came to me and I finally organised approaches to difference under five headings: the consensus /individualist perspective, the structuralist /equity /conflict perspective, the multicultural perspective, the new right perspective and the poststructural perspective. I was also able to provide concrete examples of how the different perspectives appear in selected policy documents and instances of practice.

This kind of approach to a literature review works well whether there is a lot or a little literature on the actual topic. If there is a lot of literature, using concepts and theories will help you select material that is relevant for your questions. If there is not much literature, it will be helpful to use different perspectives (possibly from other fields of enquiry) as lenses through which you can view your topic.

An exercise worth trying:

- Select two, or at most three, of the most important pieces of literature relevant to your topic/questions.
- Make notes on each one, in response to the following questions:
 1. What theoretical stance does the author take?
 2. What is the author's methodology?
 3. How adequate are the author's theory and methods for advancing your interest and questions?
 4. What questions or gaps can you see, which this piece does not address?
 5. What interesting ideas or approaches does it contain, on which you could build, or which you could take further?
 6. How does this piece further your ideas and research questions?
- Write up these notes into a short literature review.
- Discuss this review with your supervisor/s.

Adapted from Silverman, 2000: 323

Study the writing of other authors

Look for examples of how other authors take a thematic approach to literature. It is a good idea to devote time near the beginning of the thesis process to trawling through journals for articles that you can use as exemplars or templates for your literature review, and, indeed, for your thesis as a whole. If you find two or three pieces of writing that you like and that appeal to your own interests, then you can 'apprentice' yourself to that work and model your own on it. Many researchers work in this way, even in the positivist research

community, as Mishler's classic article (1990) illustrates. Do not worry that this constitutes plagiarism. As long as you acknowledge your sources fully and discuss the significance of the texts that constituted your starting point, you are not plagiarising another's work. (Booth et al (1995: 166-170) have a very good section on plagiarism.)

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is using someone's writing/ideas/thoughts and not crediting or citing the source of the information. This is dishonest and cheating! Reading and using existing literature is a valuable part of the research process and crediting the work to the correct author is the ethical thing to do. By not crediting the author you are stealing their intellectual property and this has severe penalties. With the Internet it is easier than ever to "lift" a passage from a source and fit it neatly into an essay, project, thesis or even book. However many universities are introducing plagiarism software where a piece of writing is scanned to detect any unoriginal text. To avoid any confusion ask your supervisor about citation styles and compiling a bibliography.

Below is an example of how one of us (Anne B. Ryan) used the work of other authors.

Anne writes:

My MA thesis (Ryan, 1992) started life in this way. I began with the notion of doing research on sexuality in schooling, from a feminist perspective. I wanted to know how sexuality and concepts like sexual reputation were implicated in the regulation and social control of girls in the context of schooling. My question came from a combination of my professional experience as a teacher, my personal experience of being subject to sexist discourses of sexuality, and my positioning as a feminist. The question and related sub-questions clearly did not lend themselves to survey research. However, I could also see the limitations of simply 'telling it like it is' and taking everyday descriptions and accounts at face value. If I had taken at face value every description of a girl as a slut, I would not have advanced the exploration of my topic.

One particular text (Lees, 1986) put me on the road to a subsequent exploration of the subtle operation of power and regulation. I was introduced to the theoretical concepts of discourse, identity and subjectivity and could see their value for exploring questions like mine. The texts gave me theoretical 'handles' on my questions, helping me to make sense of complex life experience. Having read them, I followed up some of their references, and one new idea led to another, allowing me to construct a coherent literature review, and also providing ideas for data collection and analysis.

Evaluating literature

It should be clear by now that the literature review is not simply a digest of content of the literature you read. Laying out the functions and procedures as we have done above could give the impression that undertaking a review is a mechanical process. And undoubtedly, procedures and techniques can be a good means to get started. But you are required to *evaluate* the literature, not regurgitate it. (Day, 1996: 41 emphasis added). Regurgitating means giving a kitchen-sink type listing of summaries of the work of other authors. You end up with little more than an annotated bibliography, which is useless for furthering your research questions.

Evaluating means that you constantly ask questions such as:

- How is this piece of literature furthering my research agenda?
- How is this useful for developing my topic?
- Why is this adequate or inadequate to my purposes?
- What are other authors taking for granted, but which I am questioning?
- Where/how/why are their methods illuminating, pushing forward thinking on the topic, or where are they inadequate?
- Where/how/why is their theoretical stance adequate or inadequate for my purposes?

If you evaluate and write critically, then by the end of your review, the reader will be able to conclude that, 'Yes, of course this is the exact study that needs to be done at this time to move knowledge in this field a little further along' (Rudestam and Newton, 1992: 47, cited in Silverman, 2000: 229). To do this, you build on the work of some commentators and reject others.

Reject some, build on others

There are two strands to the literature on any topic: the literature you reject, and the literature you build on (Burawoy, 2005). The literature you reject is that which is inadequate for your purpose in some way, for example in the way that is outlined in the box above. The author/s may take a particular stance that you cannot accept, and you should outline why you refute this stance, but you should not spend too much time or space engaging with this literature.

The literature you build on comes from authors who are close to you in their epistemological and/or theoretical stances (Burawoy, 2005). This work is close to your concerns and you can go into some detail about why it helps push forward your research agenda. But you also need to differentiate yourself from it. That is, you indicate where it points but does not go, ideas that it suggests to you, but which it does not develop. You suggest how you could develop one of those ideas in your work. You remain in continuous dialogue with this strand of the literature (Burawoy, 2005), but you also take it forward. The best way to see how this is done is to read the work of others who engage with literature in this way.

Revealing your stance through the literature you review

The review is the place where you explore the significance of other people's work, and its relation to your work. Schratz and Walker (1995: 102) comment that the review is a place where the writer 'lays down a set of markers', thus helping the reader to 'develop a perspective on the study, allowing it to be located relative to ideas that are current (and sometimes less current, neglected or excluded) within the field'. This emphasis echoes our theme throughout this book, that awareness of your epistemological stance is essential to doing a good thesis.

To summarise:

Your literature review should:

- Establish and explain the theories and concepts that you are working with, via an examination of selected pieces of literature;
- Examine the links between the pieces reviewed, and how they build on each other or contradict each other;
- Indicate variation, complexity and multiplicity in the literature dealing with your topic;
- Lead the reader to see the gaps or spaces for development in the field, and to agree with you on the need for your particular study;
- Develop your identity as a researcher and critic.

The importance of writing

Reading is important, but you have to end up with a written piece. Start writing in note form as soon as possible. Develop your notes into short pieces of 'proper' text, that is, formal writing that you would be happy to show to a supervisor or fellow student.

Writing helps to develop ideas. Structure your review in sections to reflect different approaches, interpretations, schools of thought or areas of the subject. Use lots of sub-headings for your sections and sub-sections. You can expand, delete or collapse these sections into each other as you develop the work. It is also useful to readers to have sub-headings, as they provide signposts to what is in the review.

Improving your draft

The following comments are often made by supervisors about drafts:

- Not clear where this is leading or why.
- You do not explain what the purpose of this argument is.
- A lot of good, interesting material – needs a better structure.
- Content is lost in confused layout.
- Even though the English is good, I found this difficult to follow.
- Introductory section is poorly structured, lacking clear problem definition.
- Conclusions could tie in more fully to some of the issues raised in the introduction.

As you write, ask yourself if any of these comments could apply to your work. Or ask a critical but supportive friend to read your work, and make helpful suggestions about clarity and layout.

Once you have a reasonably coherent draft, even if it contains under-developed ideas or unfinished sections, ask your supervisor to read it and comment. In other words, enter some kind of dialogue with her/him about it. Early in the thesis process, it is useful to talk to your supervisor about ideas, even if you have written nothing. However you have to get down to writing after initial discussions. It is difficult for a supervisor to help you take your work forward if you do not provide written material that s/he can engage with. Of course, your supervisor cannot be expected to re-read the entire draft every time you make a small change. But most are happy to comment on each significant stage of a draft.

Mysteriously, good new ideas or developments of ideas often arise once you have pressed the send button or put the draft in the post. It is usually good for the creative process to let a draft go and give it to someone else. The letting go seems to free up the writer's mind and facilitate moving the work forward. So don't wait until you have the 'perfect' draft before you ask your supervisor to read your material, whether that is the literature review or any other chapter of your thesis.