

The Literature Review

What is a Literature Review?

A research literature review is a systematic, explicit and reproducible method of identifying, evaluating and synthesising the existing body of completed and recorded work produced by researchers, scholars and practitioners

Fink, A. (2005) *Conducting Research Literature Reviews: From the Internet to Paper*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p.3 , cited in Blaxter, C, Hughes, C and Tight, M. (2006) *How to Research*, Maidenhead: Open University Press, p.122

Blaxter, Hughes and Tight draw a distinction between

- a literature search- the process of finding literature
- a literature survey- the description of what exists
- a literature review- making sense of the review in context

A good literature review should:

- address a specific, well-focussed question;
- search for, locate and collate the results of the search in a systematic way;
- critically appraise the quality of the research in the light of the research question;
- synthesise the results of the review in an explicit way;
- make the knowledge base more accessible;
- identify gaps in existing knowledge;
- provide the context for research undertaken in the study;
- look towards a future research agenda.

Key Questions that a Literature Review can answer

- What are the key sources?
- What are the major issues and debates about the topic?
- What are the political standpoints?
- What are the origins and definitions of the topic?
- What are the key concepts, theories and underpinning ideas?
- 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?

(Adapted from Hart, C. (1988) *Doing a Literature Review: Releasing the Social Science Research Imagination*, London: Sage, cited in Blaxter, C, Hughes, C and Tight, M. (2006) *How to Research*, Maidenhead: Open University Press

What is Critical Reading?

Reading that:

- goes beyond description, by offering opinions on and making a personal response to what has been written;
- relates writing and research to each other, indicating differences and contradictions;
- identifies inconsistencies or gaps in arguments;
- seeks to understand the development of a line of argument or development of a concept over time;
- does not take what is written at face value;
- tries to make explicit values and assumptions embedded in writing;
- sees research writing as representing a contested terrain, in which differing standpoints will be apparent;
- shows an awareness of the weight of sources in relation to others;
- shows an awareness of ways of creating distance from the subject matter through the use of a carefully qualified 'voice'

A critical appraisal can often be appreciative as well. It is the distance from the material which is important.

Undertaking a Literature Review

- Identify the question;
- Identify your position, your own context and your concerns;
- Use the literature to argue your research question- don't just list and describe all that's been written about the topic;
- View all the literature critically;
- Explain why you have chosen to sample the books and articles presented;
- Look for patterns in the literature
- View the literature through an explicit theoretical lens;
- Briefly explain how researchers have reached their conclusions, if they have been explicit about methodology;
- Identify gaps in the literature;
- Be aware of developments in research over time, especially when reporting 'dated' findings;
- Be aware of international variations in research- how has the national context of the research influenced findings or questions?
- Provide the reader with signposts to link sections of the chapter, while indicating the broad flow;
- Provide a summary which emphasises the way in which the research cited provides a context for your own research:
- Don't forget to revisit the research in your discussion chapter to demonstrate how your study has supported or departed from the established context.