

GEO-A-CC-5-11-TH – Research Methodology and Fieldwork

Topic: Literature review

MANAS PAUL
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
RAMMOHAN COLLEGE, KOLKATA

LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review is a search and evaluation of the available literature in your given subject or chosen topic area. It documents the state of the art with respect to the subject or topic you are writing about.

A literature review has four main objectives:

- It **surveys** the literature in your chosen area of study,
- It **synthesises** the information in that literature into a summary,
- It **critically analyses** the information gathered by identifying gaps in current knowledge; by showing limitations of theories and points of view; and by formulating areas for further research and reviewing areas of controversy,
- It **presents** the literature in an organised way.

A literature review shows your readers that you have an in-depth grasp of your subject; and that you understand where your own research fits into and adds to an existing body of agreed knowledge.

Four main tasks of a literature review:

- demonstrates a familiarity with a body of knowledge and establishes the credibility of your work;
- summarises prior research and says how your project is linked to it;
- integrates and summarises what is known about a subject;
- demonstrates that you have learnt from others and that your research is a starting point for new ideas.

Objectives of a literature review

The first step of any research project is to review the field. So let's think about surveying, synthesising, critically analysing and presenting in more detail. A literature review does the following:

- Identifies gaps in current knowledge.
- Avoids reinventing the wheel – i.e. it saves you wasting time researching something that's already been done.
- Allows you to show that you are building on a foundation of existing knowledge and ideas – i.e. carrying on from where others have already reached.
- Identifies other people working in the same field. Knowing who's already working in your area and getting in touch with them can be an invaluable source of knowledge and support.
- Demonstrates the depth of your knowledge about your research.
- Identifies the important works in your area and shows that you've read them.

- Provides an intellectual context for your own work, and enables you to position your project in relation to others in the field.
- Identifies opposing views.
- Puts your own work in perspective – are you doing something completely new, revisiting an old controversy in the light of new evidence, etc?
- Demonstrates your research skills – i.e. you not only know about work in your area, you also know how to access it.
- Identifies information and ideas that may be relevant to your project.
- Identifies methods that may be relevant to your project.

Key points to remember

Here are some things to bear in mind when researching and writing your literature review.

- It is not a descriptive list.
- It is not a book by book and article by article summary.
- It is not a survey of every single thing that's ever been written about your topic.
- It must be defined by a guiding concept i.e. essay question, research project or objective.
- It must tell the reader what knowledge and ideas have been established and agreed in your area and outline their strengths and weaknesses.

The structure of a literature review

A literature review should be structured like any other essay: it should have an introduction, a middle or main body, and a conclusion.

Introduction

The introduction should:

- define your topic and provide an appropriate context for reviewing the literature;
- establish your reasons – i.e. point of view – for reviewing the literature;
- explain the organisation – i.e. sequence – of the review;
- state the scope of the review – i.e. what is included and what isn't included. For example, if you were reviewing the literature on obesity in children you might say something like: There are a large number of studies of obesity trends in the general population. However, since the focus of this research is on obesity in children, these will not be reviewed in detail and will only be referred to as appropriate.

Main body

The middle or main body should:

- organise the literature according to common themes;
- provide insight into the relation between your chosen topic and the wider subject area e.g. between obesity in children and obesity in general;

- move from a general, wider view of the literature being reviewed to the specific focus of your research.

Conclusion

The conclusion should:

- summarise the important aspects of the existing body of literature;
- evaluate the current state of the literature reviewed;
- identify significant flaws or gaps in existing knowledge;
- outline areas for future study;
- link your research to existing knowledge.

Task of literature search

Define your terms. The first thing to do is to define your topic or research project; or, if you have been given a set question, make sure you understand it. Ask yourself what the key concepts are. Compile a list of keywords – and synonyms for them – and this will help you to develop a research strategy.

Search creatively. When you've done this, you need to identify all the relevant information sources. This may include: libraries, indexes and electronic databases, and the Internet.

Use the library. Do you know what's in your institution's library that's relevant to your topic? Make sure you do – it's an obvious place to start so don't forget it! Remember that every book and journal published in the UK is held at the British Library and you can do inter-library loans. Ask your library staff for assistance.

Journals. Remember that journals are the best place to find the most recently published research. And don't forget that many journals are now online only publications.

Newspapers and magazines are a good source for current topical issues, although they are not always very useful for in-depth analysis. For example, if you are writing on a business-related topic you may find useful items in *The Economist*, *Fortune* and *Harvard Business Review*.

Don't limit yourself to obvious sources. For example, libraries contain books and journals but they also contain unpublished MA and PhD theses that may contain research relevant to your topic. Similarly, make sure you do speculative searches i.e. try typing in 'The Journal of [Your Topic]' – you may be surprised what comes up.

Other less obvious sources also include:

Conference papers. These are collections of papers presented at conferences and, like journals, often contain 'cutting edge' research. These collections are published on the Internet, in special editions of relevant journals and in one-off books.

National and local Government publications. These include reports, yearbooks, White and Green papers, policy documents, manuals and statistical surveys.

Publishers' websites. These sites often contain summaries of recent publications and the full-text electronic journals. Two sites that have comprehensive online resources are Emerald and Blackwell Science.

Databases. For many subject areas – particularly sciences and social sciences – there are online databases listing current articles.

