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How to write a dissertation literature review: an in-depth guide

So, you have been tasked with writing your dissertation literature review. It's a simple endeavour; you just dust off your books, settle down in your chair coffee in hand, ready to jot down quick summaries of your readings as you skim through the pages.

Literature review done? Not quite.

What is a literature review?

In short, a dissertation literature review provides a critical assessment of the sources (literature) you have gathered and read surrounding your subject area, and then identifies a “gap” in that literature that your research will attempt to address.

There are a lot of misunderstandings about what a dissertation literature review entails. Whilst in some cases a dissertation literature review can be a simple summary of important sources, most often it requires you to critically engage with the text to convey your opinions of it, as well as any critiques that you may have. What is your interpretation of a particular source? Does this interpretation differ considerably from other viewpoints in the literature? This is the sort of critical engagement expected in a literature review.

Whereas a summary will most likely provide a simple recap of the general arguments of the source(s), the [expectations concerning a literature review](#) extend beyond this. A literature review may provide a new perspective on a classic research paper or it may combine both new and old interpretations (this is the “gap” – more on this later). A literature review may also provide a thorough and critical outline of the intellectual developments in a field with a focus on major, and often polemical, debates. In other

scenarios, a literature review may also provide an assessment of a source and inform a reader about its validity, pertinence and relevance to the research subject.

"In a literature review, you're aiming to summarise and provide a critical analysis of the research arguments you have found in your readings, without making new contributions to the literature. Hence the term: "literature review"."

There tends to be confusion between literature reviews and academic papers in general, but they are not one and the same. Generally, academic papers aim to provide new research material about a particular subject, and a literature review features as part of this objective. In a research paper, the literature review forms the basis of the research – it helps to highlight any research gaps as support for a new argument or insights you intend to provide. In a literature review, you're aiming to summarise and provide a critical analysis of the research arguments you have found in your readings, without making *new* contributions to the literature. Hence the term: "literature *review*".

Is a literature review really necessary?

Now that we know what a literature review is, the next step is to understand the point of writing one in the first place. Like it or not, a literature review is an essential part of any academic piece of writing, as it demonstrates to your tutor or reader that you have a nuanced understanding of the sources concerning your research area or question.

Although it may seem arbitrary, the literature review helps to persuade the person reading and marking your assignment that what you have written about is relevant and your arguments are justified and worthwhile. So, in short, a literature review is essential, and you need to put the necessary time into getting it right.

How do you write a dissertation literature review?

As the next section of this blog is quite lengthy, we've broken it down into several key steps which should make it easier to follow when writing your own dissertation literature review. You start by identifying your sources, then you read and re-read them. Next, you think about any gaps in the research or literature you have used, and

finally, you write your review using all the preparation and information gathered in the steps prior.

Identify sources

To write a good dissertation literature review, you need to have a fair idea of what sources you would like to review. If you haven't been given a formal reference list by your tutor, refer back to the techniques we recommended earlier.

Make sure that your sources are balanced; include enough books and academic journals and any useful published work from reputable scholars. To help you choose your sources appropriately, you might want to think about the parameters and objectives of your research. What are you hoping to find out? In [your literature review](#), what theoretical issues or perspectives do you aim to tackle? How about your methodology? Will you focus on mainly qualitative or quantitative studies, or a mixture of both? These general questions should help guide you in selecting your sources and again, remember that the abstract of a source is a very useful tool. Having a quick scan of the abstract and its 'keywords' will often give you an indication of whether the source will be useful for your research or not.

As you're identifying your sources, ensure you keep a list as it's very easy to lose focus given the wide scope of the Internet. Reference tools such as [Mendeley](#) allow you to store your sources online and via a desktop app, and are a great way to keep your bibliography organised. The citation tools attached to these programmes will also allow you to simply export citations in a format of your choice when required later. They will save you countless hours trying to figure out how to use [Harvard or APA](#) referencing correctly.

Read your sources

Now that you have organised your sources efficiently, it's time to read through them. As unnatural as it may feel, it's most effective to read in a few stages, as detailed below:

First, go through all the texts to get a sense of their general content and arguments. This will also help you judge which sources you mainly want to focus on in your review. During the second stage of your reading, you can then take a more critical, in-depth look at your sources. Make a lot of notes, be critical, ask questions. What is your academic opinion on the text? Do you have any comments on the methodological approach, the theoretical argument or the general hypothesis? Note these down. It will ensure that your literature review is not merely a summary of your readings, and will encourage a clear line of argument so that your work is logical and coherent.

Consider gaps in the research

When [writing a dissertation literature review](#), an essential thing to consider is identifying the research gap. Identifying the gap is particularly important if your review forms part of a research proposal, as it will highlight the pertinence of your research – assuming that your research has been designed to fill this gap. In other instances, identifying the gap is an indication of good critical analysis and can score you extra points.

To identify the “gap” it is important that we know what this “gap” is. A research gap is essentially the existence of a research question, perspective or problem that has not been answered in the existing literature on any field of study. Identifying the research gap is important for highlighting the originality of your research; it proves you’re not simply recounting or regurgitating existing research. It also shows that you are very much aware of the status of the literature in your chosen field of study, which in turn, demonstrates the amount of research and effort you have put into your review.

Many students, especially at post-graduate level, find it extremely difficult to identify research gaps in their subject area. For post-graduate research papers, identifying research gaps and formulating research questions that can address these gaps form the very essence of a research paper. Identifying research gaps does not have to be a difficult endeavour and there are several ways to overcome this difficulty:

Start by reading

A simple approach will be to read important parts of key articles in your research area.

First, note that you'll have to sift through many articles to identify the ones that are most suitable for your research. A quick search using keywords on [Google Scholar](#) will often give you a quick overview of the available literature. Other useful sources include databases such as [JSTOR](#) or [Wiley Online Library](#). You can then snowball additional articles by clicking on 'related articles' or checking out which other papers have cited your source.

Abstracts and recommendations

Whichever avenue you choose, reading the abstract is often a good starting point to get a sense of what the articles entails. You should also do a quick examination of the introductory and concluding paragraphs of the paper as these sections always provide some information on the aims and outcomes of the research, as well as 'recommendations for future studies.' These recommendations typically provide some insight on the research gaps in the literature. Another route would be to simply read as much as you can on your research subject while considering which research areas still need addressing in the literature – this is usually an indication of research gaps.

Write your review

Now you're well prepared to start putting fingers to keyboard. Consider the following pointers:

1. Use sample literature reviews

Have a look at [sample dissertation literature reviews](#) in your subject area and read them thoroughly to familiarise yourself with existing key debates and themes. This can be a good starting point for framing and structuring your own review. If you are not familiar with academic writing, going through samples will help you to get a sense of what is expected in this regard. Pay attention to the academic language and formal style used. Also, remember that the bibliography or reference section of your selected texts will help you to snowball further references if you need any.

2. Keep it simple

Keep your topic as narrowed down as possible. Remember that there are hundreds – or in some instances, thousands – of sources or perspectives concerning any subject area or topic. Researchers investigate research problems in many divergent ways and the

literature available on any given subject is extremely broad. In your literature review, you won't be expected to address every argument or perspective concerning your topic – this might actually undermine your ability to write a coherent and focused piece. You'll make your work easier if you limit the scope of your work. In your review, ensure that you clearly state what the focus of your work will be.

3. Make sure your sources are as current as possible

If you are reviewing scientific work, it's essential your sources are as current as possible given the advancements in the field over the years. In the medical field particularly, research is constantly evolving and a source that's only three years old may be even out-dated. In the social sciences this rule may not apply, as many theoretical works are classics and you will be expected to be familiar with these perspectives. You might have to review the work of Marx, or Hobbes, or any other classic scholar. You still need to balance theory with current approaches, as you will need to demonstrate the ways in which perspectives in the literature have changed over the years, or you may even want to demonstrate how scholars have used classic theories to inform their work.

4. Consider the organisation of your work

In a dissertation literature review, organising your work goes beyond having an introduction, body and conclusion. You'll be reviewing a number of texts, so you'll also have to think clearly about how to organise themes, topics and your argument in general. Below is a detailed guide on how to do this:

- Think about the basic structure first

Like any other academic paper, a dissertation literature review will comprise a basic introduction, body, and conclusion.

The introduction of a literature review should be clear, short and focused. It should outline the focus of the review – in other words, it should clearly state the main topics to be covered. A good literature review will also state the arguments to be made, as well as underlying rationale that underpins these arguments.

The body of your literature review will include an in-depth discussion of the academic sources you have chosen to review. You may choose to organise your sources according to themes, methodology or even based on a chronological order. In the body of your review, ensure that your arguments are presented clearly and that you link these arguments with the literature. Is there a scholar that agrees with your view? Say so, in a way that the reader will understand easily. This demonstrates that you are very familiar with the academic research in your field. Remember to also make note of any views that do not agree with your position; excluding these arguments will reduce the methodological robustness of your piece. You can use direct quotations in your literature review, however do so sparingly so you don't appear lazy. Most tutors will not approach it kindly; the purpose of a literature review is to demonstrate your ability to critically engage with a piece of text, and littering your review with direct quotes isn't a good indication of this. Instead, try to paraphrase quotations and only use direct quotes if it really helps to illustrate your argument.

In the summary of your dissertation literature review, it's important to give a summary of the conclusions you've drawn from your readings. If your literature review forms part of a broader research proposal, reiterate the gaps in the literature here, and clearly state how your proposed research will fill these gaps. Make recommendations for future research in this section too, which demonstrates your analytical skills and will score you some extra points.

- Pay extra attention to the structure of the body

You now have the basic structure of your research in place, however it's worth dedicating some time to what the body of your work should entail. The body is the main core of your work, so it's important to consider how you will frame and organise it. You have options here – you can choose to organise the content of your work based on a chronological method, based on themes, trends or methodology, or based on arguments.

To structure the body of work chronologically, you will have to organise your sources based on when they were published. A limitation of this approach is that it inhibits continuity in your arguments and in some instances, can undermine the coherence of your work. Use with caution.

A more coherent way of organising your work is to group your sources based on the arguments they make in a 'for versus against' manner. This enables you to present your work in a more dynamic way and what's more, makes the key debates in the literature more obvious. Say you were trying to convey the debates on European migration policy, you might want to start by writing something along these lines:

"While scholars such as X argue that migration policies must be made more stringent to counteract the increased flow of Syrian refugees to Europe, other scholars such as Y offer a divergent perspective. They specifically espouse a perspective based on a human rights approach..."

This approach also leaves room for you to insert your voice into the literature. Consider this statement:

"While X argues for the enactment of more stringent migration policies, this paper argues along the lines of Y that migration policies should be based on human rights considerations."

Using this technique also allows you to introduce additional literature that supports your position.

Another way of organising your content is according to theme; or sub-themes, if your review focuses on one overarching topic. This method of organisation still allows you to present an overview of any polemical debates within these sub-themes. A thematic review can easily shift between chronological periods within each sub-section too.

Structuring work using a methodological approach is quite a common approach, however it's often used in tandem with other ways of organising sources. This method is particularly evident in introductory sections

whereby researchers may simply want to state that a particular subject has been mostly studied from a qualitative or quantitative perspective (they will often then cite a number of scholars or studies to support this claim). In scientific reviews however, a methodological approach may form the basis of the discussions in the body. If this is the case for you, focus on the methods used by various researchers. How did they go about answering a particular research question? Were there any limitations to this method? If so, what method(s) would have been better?

You'll soon realise that organising the body of your literature review is an iterative process and you'll more often than not, use all of these approaches in your write-up. The body of your research may also include additional sections that do not necessarily form a part of its organisational structure. For instance, you might want to include a 'context section' that provides some insight on any background detail required for understanding the focus of the literature review. It may also focus on historical considerations. You could include a short methodology section that details the approach you used in selecting and analysing your sources.

5. Write the paragraphs of the body

Once you have settled on the approach to writing your body, you must now write each of its paragraphs in a way that is in keeping with academic conventions. Consider this paragraph from a literature review about stakeholder participation for environmental management, to clarify the discussion that follows:

- Despite the rhetoric and the concerns that have been expressed, there have been few attempts to investigate the validity of the many claims that have been made for stakeholder participation (Webler, 1999; Beierle, 2002; Brody, 2003; Blackstock et al., 2007). The few attempts that have been made have tended to focus on evaluating the process rather than the outcomes (e.g. Beierle, 2002; Renn et al., 1995; Rowe and Frewer, 2000). This may be partly due to the challenge of selecting appropriate evaluation criteria and data collection methods. Blackstock et al., 2007 argue that the evaluation of participatory processes should itself be participatory, with stakeholders selecting and applying the evaluation criteria. However, this is not

straightforward. Webler and Tuler (2006) found strong differences of opinion between participants that they selected from ten case studies, about what constituted a "good" participatory process. (*Source: Reed, M.S., 2008. Stakeholder participation for environmental management: a literature review. Biological conservation, 141(10), pp.2417-2431.*)

As the example above suggests, a dissertation literature review must be written using a formal and academic style. Also, note how sources have been grouped according to both arguments and themes. Remember we noted that the process of grouping sources in the body of your literature review is never a linear one? You will often use a combination of the approaches that we have discussed. Ensure that your writing is concise, coherent and devoid of any personal or strong language. Avoid any phrases like, "I hate X's work"; a more academic way of stating your disagreement would be to simply state: "I would argue against X's position that...", or "X's argument is inconsistent with the evidence because...", or "X's arguments are based on false assumptions because...". In the sample paragraph above, notice the use of words like "argue" – this is a good academic alternative to more commonplace words such as "says". Other good alternatives include "states", "asserts", "proposes" or "claims". More academic options include "opine", "posit", "postulate", or "promulgate", however some tutors and readers find these words to be too 'heavy' and archaic, so ensure that you are familiar with the writing standards in your institution.

If your writing is tailored to a peer-reviewed journal, it's worth having a look at articles within that journal to get a sense of the writing style. Most tutors will provide a guideline on writing styles, and it's important you adhere to this brief. You will often be required to also use the third person when writing a literature review, thus phrases such as "this paper argues" or "this paper is of the view that..." are appropriate.

There are exceptions at post-graduate level or generally – like when you have conducted your own primary research or published your work widely – which give you the academic authority to boldly make claims. In cases like these, the use of first person is suitable and you may use phrases such as "I argue" or "I propose".

Remember also to generally use present tense when referring to opinions and theories (although in the context of specific research experiments, the use of the past tense is better).

Beyond the use of the academic terms suggested above, 'linking' words are also particularly important when writing a literature review, since you'll be grouping a lot of writers together with either similar or divergent opinions. Useful linking words and phrases include: *similarly, there are parallels, in convergence with...*

When there is disagreement, you may want to use any of the following: *However, conversely, on the other hand, diverges from, antithetical to, differential from...*

6. Write the conclusion

The conclusion of a dissertation literature review should always include a summary of the implications of the literature, which you should then link to your argument or general research question.

Some final notes

The overall structure of your literature review will be largely based on your research area and the academic conventions that are in line with it. Nevertheless, there are some essential steps that apply across all disciplines and that you should ensure you follow:

Do not simply describe the opinions of writers

Analyse, analyse, analyse, and ensure that your analysis is critical (what have the writers missed; where does your opinion sit with theirs, etc.).

Structure the body of your argument using various techniques

Your structure should be organised based on thematic areas, key debates or controversial issues, and according to methodological approaches. Keep your review dynamic, but coherent. Remember to identify literature gaps and link this to your own research.

Use ample evidence

This is extremely important and forms the very essence of a dissertation literature

review. You must refer to various sources when making a point; see the sample paragraph above for an example of this. Your arguments and interpretation of a research topic must be backed by evidence. Do not make baseless claims, as a literature review is an academic piece of writing and not an opinion piece.

Be very selective

Not every piece of research has to be reviewed. If you are determined to show that you are aware of the available literature out there, try writing techniques such as: *There is robust literature available concerning the migration patterns of Syrian refugees. Notable works include: X(2015), y (2013), Z (2014).* Once you have acknowledged these works, you do not have to review them in detail. Be selective about the sources that you will discuss in detail in your review.

Do not rely too much on direct quotes

Only use them to emphasise a point. Similarly, don't rely too heavily on the work of a single author. Instead, highlight the importance of that author in your research and move on. If you need to keep going back to the work of that author, then you need to link those discussions with your work. Do not simply provide a summary of the author's work. In what ways does your work agree or disagree with his/hers? Be critical.

Make your voice heard

Yes, the whole point of the literature review is to provide a critical analysis and summary of the viewpoints out there, but a critical analysis does include the fact that you need to make your opinion known in the context of the literature. Note how skilfully, in the earlier sample paragraph by Reed (2008), he weaves his opinions with references. Read back over the sample and try to perfect this skill.

Ensure that you reference your work correctly

And make sure you use the appropriate referencing style. For more help on this, [click here](#).