

Literature Review

Definition

A literature review surveys books, scholarly articles, and any other sources relevant to a particular issue, area of research, or theory, and by doing so, provides a description, summary, and critical evaluation of these works in relation to the research problem being investigated.

Importance of a Good Literature Review

The analytical features of a literature review might:

- **Give a new interpretation of old material or combine new with old interpretations,**
- **Trace the intellectual progression of the field, including major debates,**
- **Depending on the situation, evaluate the sources and advise the reader on the most pertinent or relevant research, or**
- **Usually in the conclusion of a literature review, identify where gaps exist in how a problem has been researched to date.**

The purpose of a literature review is to:

- Bring clarity and focus to your research problem;
- Improve your research methodology
- Broaden your knowledge
- Contextualize your findings

Types of Literature Reviews

- **Argumentative Review**

This form examines literature selectively in order to support or refute an argument, deeply imbedded assumption, or philosophical problem already established in the literature.

- **Integrative Review**

Considered a form of research that reviews, critiques, and synthesizes representative literature on a topic in an integrated way such that new frameworks and perspectives on the topic are generated.

- **Historical Review**

Historical literature reviews focus on examining research throughout a period of time, often starting with the first time an issue, concept, theory, phenomena emerged in the literature, then tracing its evolution within the scholarship of a discipline.

- **Methodological Review**

Reviewing methods of analysis provides a framework of understanding at different levels, how researchers draw upon a wide variety of knowledge ranging from the conceptual level to practical documents for use in fieldwork in the areas of quantitative and qualitative integration, sampling, interviewing, data collection, and data analysis.

- **Systematic Review**

This form consists of an overview of existing evidence pertinent to a clearly formulated research question, which uses pre-specified and standardized methods to identify and critically appraise relevant research, and to collect, report, and analyze data from the studies that are included in the review.

- **Theoretical Review**

The purpose of this form is to examine the corpus of theory that has accumulated in regard to an issue, concept, theory, phenomena. The theoretical literature review helps to establish what theories already exist, the relationships between them, to what degree the existing theories have been investigated, and to develop new hypotheses to be tested.

Consider the following issues before writing the literature review:

1. Roughly how many sources should I include?
2. What types of sources should I review (books, journal articles, websites; scholarly versus popular sources)?
3. Should I summarize, synthesize, or critique sources by discussing a common theme or issue?
4. Should I evaluate the sources?
5. Should I provide subheadings and other background information, such as definitions and/or a history?

Ways to Organize Your Literature Review

- **Chronology of Events**

If your review follows the chronological method, you could write about the materials according to when they were published. This approach should only be followed if a clear path of research building on previous research can be identified and that these trends follow a clear chronological order of development.

By Publication

Order your sources by publication chronology, then, only if the order demonstrates a more important trend. For instance, you could order a review of literature on environmental studies of brown fields if the progression revealed, for example, a change in the soil collection practices of the researchers who wrote and/or conducted the studies.

Thematic

Thematic reviews of literature are organized around a topic or issue, rather than the progression of time. However, progression of time may still be an important factor in a thematic review.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Sources in your literature review do not clearly relate to the research problem;
- You do not take sufficient time to define and identify the most relevant sources to use in the literature review related to the research problem;
- Relies exclusively on secondary analytical sources rather than including relevant primary research studies or data;
- Uncritically accepts another researcher's findings and interpretations as valid, rather than examining critically all aspects of the research design and analysis;
- Does not describe the search procedures that were used in identifying the literature to review;
- Reports isolated statistical results rather than synthesizing them in chi-squared or meta-analytic methods; and,
- Only includes research that validates assumptions and does not consider contrary findings and alternative interpretations found in the literature.