Literature Review

What is ‘literature review’?

We present, classify and evaluate of what researchers have said on a topic.

It is focused and structured around the question, issue or topic we investigate.

For a literature review, we review a few articles and compare them.

When writing a literature review, we summarise, interpret and evaluate what we have found (published articles). The purpose is to find out the status of the current knowledge of the topic or issue.

We do not just describe what others have written. We do the following, according to Davies (2011):

- Compare and contrast what the authors say on an issue
- Identify similar views
- Criticise some aspects of methodology
- Identify differences in authors’ views
- Highlight outstanding studies
- Identify gaps in studies

The review may also identify disagreements, indicate the need for further study, provide an outline of a theory, point at some direction of future research and outline a practical issue that needs to be resolved.

Why literature review?

Readers should be able to understand the issue after we summarise, interpret and evaluate the material. They want to know what literature exists and our evaluation of the material.

It also indicates what has been written and whether there are gaps in knowledge that need to be addressed by new research.

So what exactly do we do?

We identify and recognise the information that is relevant to the question, then we synthesise the information and evaluate the information, according to the issue or topic we investigate.

Critical thinking skill

Critical thinking involves examining and analysing the information/evidence so that we can assess its validity. We need to try to understand the deep meaning of statements,
consider different points of view and seek explanations before we accept what we are reading and analysing. This means that we should use objective judgment, be open-minded and sceptical.

**Objective:** impartial, with no emotional reactions, non-personal views when considering an issue or a topic.

**Sceptical:** not taking for granted what we read, question statements, assumptions and conclusions. See if the evidence presented in an article proves that. Question what you read.

**Open-minded:** Step out of your thinking box and consider a few points of view. There may be some other explanations of the issue. Be flexible in interpreting the issue and accept evidence that may be different from your experience or knowledge.

**Step 1.**

First seek the information and find articles on the topic. Is the source a peer-reviewed article? Write down all the details of the source. Then scan (read) them. Read an abstract, and then go to a discussion section, or a summary of the article. Next check the first sentence of each paragraph to figure out what the paragraph is about.

**Step 2.**

Now we are going to do a critical review (summary and critique) of one article after another, separately. This is how to critically review an article:

- Write down its main ideas or themes.
- Refer to the text again and note down such details as the subject of the article, conclusions(discussion) and the argumentation or data for the author to come to such conclusions.
- Refer to the same article again – to see if you have understood the article correctly.
- You might create a flow chart of the main ideas, as recommended by Davies (2011), or jot down the main idea or a heading on the margin of your notes page.
- Go through these headings/main ideas of your notes and think about any criticism, questions and doubts you can come up with about this article. We do not criticise the author; we critically evaluate what the article is about and also the author's claims, evidence presented, statistical data, method used for the study/case and how the author uses other writers' contribution or information.
- Now think about what you agree with. Jot down your thoughts very briefly.
- Draft a brief summary of the critical review you have worked on – either in the form of an outline or a few paragraphs (concise and to the point), or brief statements. Such a summary includes (1) the main idea of the review, (2)
evidence for the idea, (3) your criticisms of this main idea and (4) your evidence and your own conclusion. This is your critical review of one article.

- We need to do the same for as many articles as we are reviewing for the literature review assignment on a specific topic.

**Step 3.**

Compare and contrast your critical reviews of each article, finding commonalities and differences. Use a colour coding technique. Group these accordingly. Critically evaluate – by applying your own critical analytical and evaluation skills.

**Step 4.**

Now we need to report the data. We combine the information and notes from our individual critical reviews into a well structured and coherent literature review draft. This means that we present synthesis of the concepts discussed by the authors in a well-organised way. Remember the synthesis must relate to our main topic or issue and we should present results of our synthesis in a summary. If we identify a controversy – we include it in our review. If there are unanswered questions, further research study should be recommended.

**How do we present and report what we have found?**

*If they present different points of view, we say: ‘While Brown (2010) states that....., White (2008) argues/claims/states/... ‟*

*If the authors’ views are closely related and distantly related, we say ‘Stevenson(2010) and McGregor(2011) both showed that.... However, Davidson (2003) demonstrated that... ‟*

*If we want to present the information in a chronological way, we say ‘Many studies contributed to ......., for example....... and later/more recent studies, for example, Smith’s (2000) showed that.......*

**Some wording that we can use:**

*Research findings indicate that..........*

*Studies have shown that......*

*Grass (2007) argues/claims/states that....*

**Some hints how to write a literature review**

- Focus on the major and most important points, ignore minor information
- Associate related ideas and combine them in your writing by providing a label or heading
• Paraphrase well – without changing the key meaning of the author’s ideas
• Take into consideration what is the focus of the author’s argumentation
• Consider the author's purpose of writing the article
• When combining ideas – look for commonalities in arguments of authors for one particular topic and make it as clear as possible
• Do not include personal views
• Check on the word amount requirement
• Review your draft for the level of academic language appropriate for literature review/report and the format
• Narrow your focus – you cannot cover all the points
• Edit and proofread your work for style and literacy (grammar, syntax, spelling, punctuation, expression, structure and presentation). Print your work before editing and proofreading. Do not submit the first draft.

(Please refer to Davies (2011, p. 235) for editing and proofreading checklist).

List of reporting verbs, according to Davies (2011, p. 158):

The author

- discusses
- examines
- explores
- investigates
- questions
- undermines
- refers to
- attacks
- supports
- presents
- dismisses
- states
- asserts
- argues
- maintains
- explains
- claims
- implies
- affirms
- assumes
- notes
- accepts
- acknowledges
- adds
- admits
- agrees
- concedes
- denies
- predicts
Please see pp. 159-161 in Davies (2011) for stating your position, stating somebody else’s view, drawing a conclusion, disagreeing, agreeing, etc.

References