

Literature Reviews
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Why conduct a lit review?

- To generate ideas, research questions (RQs), hunches, tools, and/or solutions
- To see exemplars of well executed research
- To avoid “reinventing the wheel”
- To synthesize what is known about an issue or practice
 - E.g., “Prior research has identified six primary strategies NFP organizations use to communicate changes...”
- To support one’s research choices or conclusions with credible evidence
 - e.g., “Given Computech’s situation, research suggests that the most successful strategy is likely to be...”
- To develop an argument for your study

Common problems in lit reviews

- Lacks clear focus or purpose
 - Should clearly follow from RQ and inform methods and findings
- Describes rather than synthesizes or analyzes
 - especially, “He said.... She said...”
- Over-reliance on literature loses argument and voice
- Arguments made aren’t clearly supported by literature reviewed
- Assuming too much reader familiarity with literature
- Confusing fact and opinion
- Poor organization or structure
- Literature reviewed is too narrow, scattered or old

Effective literature reviews

- Have a clear and appropriate focus and purpose
 - Phrase objective as a question or questions to be answered
- Balance tight focus with broad coverage
 - Start narrow, broaden as needed
- Are comprehensive and current
- Are accurate and clear in describing research reviewed
- Assume reader has not read the original reports referenced
- Integrate and synthesize rather than just summarizing
 - End result should be coherent set of answers to the question(s)

Appropriate sources for lit reviews

- Rule of thumb: 70% or more research-based articles and chapters
- Perhaps some from trade journals, magazines, newspapers for information on current practices, events
- Minimize use of textbooks
 - Useful for overview, getting started, finding sources

How to Search the Literature

- Exploratory phase: Identify most promising sources
 - Search databases using key terms
 - Search recent textbooks and handbooks
 - Search card catalogue and browse shelves
- Focused Search phase: Read and summarize
 - Search for and read most promising sources
 - Summarize/note potentially relevant concepts, arguments, quotes, and findings
 - Be alert for other promising sources to follow up
- Writing phase: Write tentative literature review and look for gaps

How to write literature reviews

- Organize the literature review to answer your research questions
- The RQs should suggest the main topics to be addressed
- The parts of the RQ you can't answer direct your research

Example

- Sample RQ: How do employees perceive that communication about the restructuring at Computech has influenced morale?
- Lit review might focus on how communication about restructuring affects morale, including:
 - How do organizations communicate about restructuring (or change generally)?
 - Which are the relationships between communication and morale?