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12 Carrying out a Literature Review

This chapter looks at:

- *What is a literature review?*
- *How does it differ in different fields of study?*
- *How to go about a literature review*
- *The ongoing literature review*
- *Engaging your own work with the literature – summarising, analysing, contributing and engaging in dialogue*

Your research is seen as a contribution to knowledge in the field and it needs to indicate, therefore, that there is an awareness of what that knowledge comprises. The reasons for literature reviews are twofold. You need to read yourself into the field of study in order to gauge where your own ideas fit, what can inform them, what others think and have discovered, and to define where/in what ways your area of questioning, your research and your findings could contribute to existing knowledge. Your own work both engages with the known literature and adds something else. This might seem a tall order, because you cannot possibly read everything that has been written about your field of study, nor everything about your particular area, unless it is very specialised. By searching out the literature to which your own work will contribute, you are not trying to cover and summarise everything. This would be an endless, daunting and ultimately pointless task. Yours is not a role of summariser of everyone else's thoughts and discoveries, but an engagement in *dialogue* with what has been written and what is to be written and discovered by others. You need to read the background literature to contextualise and underpin your own work rather than substitute for it. This indicates to readers and examiners that you know the field and know also that you have something to contribute to it.

Literature reviews depend upon extensive literature searching. This is (a) undertaken before the research question is posed and the purpose written then (b) ongoing, taking place alongside the research throughout. Literature reviews do not usually appear as a separate chapter as such, but form a considerable part of the introduction *because* they indicate previous work in the field, the context into which your own work fits and the different *theses* from which your own work springs, which inform it. You will be reading in areas of the field, of related fields, of critical and theoretical questioning and approaches to properly inform and drive your own work.

While the literature review you do is largely written up in the introduction, you continue to refer to key themes, texts, writers and experts as and when their work informs and relates to yours throughout the thesis or dissertation.

If you are an international student you will most probably find that you need either to seek a translation of the work of international theorists, critics or experts you hope to use in your own arguments and research, or provide your *own* translation of the quotations you use if they do not publish in English. If your university allows you to present your work in your own language and assumes that it can be examined in your own language, you will clearly not have to do this (but you would probably be translating the work you find into English!). However, most UK, Australian and US and other English-speaking universities do expect the dissertation or thesis to be presented entirely in English.

This introduction sets the scene for the research questions, the major arguments of the research and thesis and then throughout the work itself, taking different elements of the thesis argument on in different places and providing a coherent thread of reference for key arguments and ideas. In both kinds of literature review activity it is sensible to keep reading throughout the research. There could be really important new discoveries or key texts which appear even quite close to the end of your own work, and you will need to acknowledge these, even to say that they could not be incorporated into the research design because of when they were produced. This shows that you have an awareness of the field, and of the learning conversations taking place within it, and can see what your own work contributes.

> The process of the literature review involves the researcher in exploring the literature to establish the status quo, formulate a problem or research enquiry, define the value of pursuing the line of enquiry established, and compare the findings and ideas with his or her own. The product involves the synthesis of the work of others in a form that demonstrates the accomplishment of the exploratory process. (Andresen 1997, adapted from Bruce 1994)

Literature reviews establish the background and the context, and involve consulting and engaging with primary sources of all sorts, and secondary sources too, or rather other researchers and academics' contributions to the field of discussion. They involve reflection and analysis and comment on contributions to the field of study, recognising that you are aware of what has been found, the methods of research, and the underpinning arguments in your field:

> A literature review uses as its database reports of primary or original scholarship, and does not report new primary scholarship itself. The primary reports used in the literature may be verbal, but in the vast majority of cases are written documents. The types of scholarship might be empirical theoretical, critical/analytical, or methodological in nature. Second, a literature review seeks to describe, summarise, evaluate, clarify and/or integrate the content of primary reports. (Cooper 1985: 8)

The purposes of literature review, according to Andresen, are:

- becoming familiar with the 'conversation' in the subject area of interest
- identifying an appropriate research question
- ascertaining the nature of previous research and issues surrounding the research question
- finding evidence in the academic discourse to establish a need for the proposed research
- keeping abreast of ongoing work in the area of interest. (Andresen 1997, part 3: 48)

The literature review is an essential part of planning your research and helps you to develop your own line of thought. As an ongoing process it also helps you to keep abreast of developments in your subject and field and possibly enables you to get in touch with others working in the same field (you can contact other researchers and discuss work with them). Your examiners will be looking for how far your thesis contributes to knowledge in the field, to which the literature review element of your work is central.

Carrying out the literature review

There are several activities associated with handling a literature review.

You need to scour the library and associated libraries, probably using a computer to help in your search, but not substituting it completely for looking around the shelves in the area where you find a useful book. We often find other related texts in close proximity. Look in the reference sections of key books and articles you are using and of other's theses on similar topics. Here you will find what might be minor references for others' work but possibly either background or really key references for your own, depending on the different slants and lines of argument taken in these sources.

Literature searches: using the library and the Internet – a brief introduction

Every researcher needs to become familiar with the use of the libraries available to them – not always your local library, but often a specialist library, perhaps at a distance – and to make good use of the information available on the Internet also. Using e-mail and the Web to keep in touch with other researchers and your supervisor is important (see groups/support materials in Chapter 10).

Trawling for information is fascinating when you know how – and many of us do this every day. However, there is often too much information, and on the Internet it is not likely to be organised in the way you need it, so be careful with copying it. Do manage it, organise and sift it. There is a real concern with students at all levels merely downloading topical material from the Net. This is plagiarism as serious as merely copying from a book. The other problem with material on the Net is that it is put there without any quality control checks, and some of it is incorrect and poorly written. You have been warned!

You will also need to consider how to handle the information you gain in your literature searching throughout the research. One model suggests that you acquire a great deal of information, summarise the key points, keep careful references, and write the introductory literature review from this. Another suggests that, as the literature review process is ongoing throughout your work, you will need to keep returning to the field and reviewing and rereading, certainly catching up on new texts and new areas of study which become more obviously

Task

Consider:

- When have you used libraries, CD-ROMs and the Internet for research?
- Which libraries will you use?
- Which ones might you need to join?
- Will you need to develop skills using the Internet?
- Will you need to update these skills?
- What experience do you have of accessing subject indexes and abstracting databases?
- Do you have good access and if so, where?

In considering these questions, note down an action plan for:

- improving your library access – will you need to ask for a letter of reference signed by your supervisor in order to gain access to another local university library, for example, in your home town?
- improving your Internet access – will you need to take a brief training course to use the Internet for literature searching/to use the online access computers in the library?
- finding the subject indexes and the abstracting databases and conducting a trial search – do you have experience in this? Or can you conduct a trial search to give you an idea of advice you need to seek?

Action points

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relevant as your work proceeds. A reflective approach to literature searching is the most useful, that is, one which enables you to go through a cyclical model, searching, recording, processing and researching as new sources or new ideas and developments become clear (see Figure 12.1).

Your literature searching leads to the incorporation of ideas, quotations, arguments and references into your own work. You will need to establish a sound set of study and working strategies to make full use of this. Try the skills audit on the next page.

Task

What skills needs do you have?

For example:	Good	quite good	needs practice
quick and effective reading	1	2	3
• note taking	1	2	3
• summarising	1	2	3
• finding and using subject indexes and abstracting databases	1	2	3
• reference keeping	1	2	3
• interweaving your reading into your arguments and discussions.	1	2	3

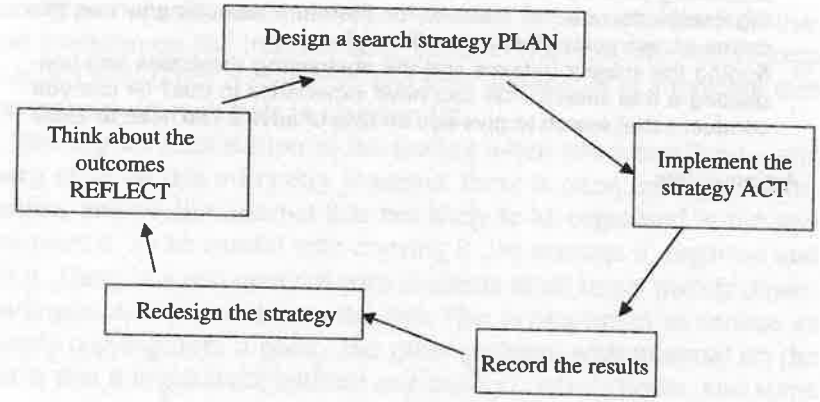

FIGURE 12.1 REFLECTIVE LITERATURE SEARCHING MODEL (BRUCE, IN ANDRESEN 1997: 16)

Abstracting, noting and summarising

You can usually take one photocopy of a journal article under copyright law. You will need, however, to take notes from and 'process' both journal articles and books, chapters and other sources. Try the 'SQ3R' method for rapid and effective notetaking:

- Survey – quick read through
- Question – what was that about?

- Read/reread – look through it all/read it carefully and reread, but only if necessary
- Record
- Take notes under main key headings (having identified these main points in your survey). Take full quotations and full citations of other references you will need to follow up.
- Summarise major arguments and quote to refer. Always indicate with references where the ideas and the quotations come from.
- Make some sub-notes and discussion points alongside your notes. Underline in colour the main ideas and arguments.
- Start to structure your notes and process the arguments.
- Review – quickly look back at the chapter/article, and so on. Have you caught the most important points, the main arguments, all you need for your own work? Have you recorded the references appropriately? Are the quotations correct? What have you missed?
- Consult some of the good study guides available to remind you of these effective practices (Cottrell 1999 or Dunleaky 1986).

Filing and retaining

You need to keep full, informative notes in card-indexes or on your computer of all the sources you consult, your contacts and correspondences. See below for comments on computer or card-index storage.

Learning journals and logs

You could also write up the ideas, arguments, findings, and so on of your ongoing literature search in a *learning journal* or learning log. This helps to show the shaping of your arguments and the shaping of your use of your reading, how it informs your investigations, research questioning and interpretation. If you are a part-time student, it also helps you to return to the key questions and findings after periods away from your study (for example, on work projects, family holidays, house moves, new babies, and so on).

Good research habits

You need to ask yourself regularly:

- Have I updated my literature search and review?
- Have I returned to key sources to investigate further what emerged as important issues?
- Have I fully recorded the reference I have found?

- Have I been writing up and using what I have found? Have I been using the ideas and spurring on more of my own ideas?
- Or have I been leaving it to stockpile (and possibly go stale)?

Management on a computer

Programmes for management of literature include Procit, Notebook and Reference Manager, among others.

Establish a list of headings that fits your research – subjects, questions, methodology, methods, and so on.

Read papers and parts of books as soon as you get them and assign headings to the material so that you can record these and later access the reference from those several appropriate headings. Consider headings of:

- author
- title
- methods
- key words and areas
- date of publication.

You need to link these headings and areas to the file management system so that when the system is interrogated it indicates work collected under the appropriate heading/author/date, and so on, as required.

This is obviously more sophisticated than a card-index which tends to force you to keep information under author in alphabetical order so that you are not immediately able to go to the repository of information on a subject area. Card-indexes, however, are portable, cheap and can be marvellously idiosyncratic. You will need to find the system that suits you and which you can manage. The most important element of each kind of storage system is that you have the information you need to retrieve. So ensure that you have:

- author
- title
- place of publication, publisher, date (the citation format which is required by your university) and page numbers, if appropriate
- areas of interest and importance – subject headings
- some key quotations
- where the source came from, for example, library, inter-library loan, the Internet, a friend's collection.

Are all recorded. Otherwise you will find that towards the middle of the thesis you cannot locate those wonderful early pieces of reading, and at the end you will have to spend days in libraries trying to track down the books and the journals with the full references in them. This is a frustrating waste of time.

For sophisticated computer users, Carol Tenopir and Gerald Lundeen's *Managing your Information* (1988) is a full source of how to create your own database and which systems to use.

Task

- Select a journal article that relates to your area of research.
- Process it using the SQ3R methods (see above).
- Now write down the key points, the full citation details, the author, subject, and so on, *on an index card.*
- decide where/under what headings, for example, author, key words, area of argument, methods, and so on you would want to store the information so that it can be retrieved when writing chapters.

Conclusion

We have looked at:

- The function of literature reviewing to form the introductory context and theoretical underpinning and to integrate with your own research throughout
- How to carry out literature searching
- How to take notes, process and make the information and ideas your own
- Storage and retrieval.

Further reading

Andresen, L.W. (1997). *Highways to Postgraduate Supervision*. Sydney: University of Western Sydney.

Cooper, H.M. (1985). *The Integrative Research Review: A Systematic Approach*. London: Sage.

Cottrell, S. (1999). *The Study Skills Handbook*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press – now Palgrave.

Dunleaky, Patrick (1986). *Studying for a Degree*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press – now Palgrave.

Tenopir, C., & Lundeen, G. (1988). *Managing your Information*. New York: Neal Schuman.

13 Choc Rese Meth and

This chapter looks a

- *Introduction to c*
- *Qualitative and/c*
- *Qualitative meth*
- *Quantitative met vations*

Choosing qu research meth

Your research will dic to underpin your wo If you wish to collec variables and verifyin them. Data is often results of data collect often much happier a people feel safe only lections of statistics understanding meani understood through q remembered, are alsc vehicles and underlyi numbers is guided at