

## How To Do A Literature Review?

### What is a Literature Review?

A literature review is a summary of previous research on a topic. Literature reviews can be either a part of a larger report of a research project, a thesis or a bibliographic essay that is published separately in a scholarly journal. Some questions to think about as you develop your literature review:

- What is known about the subject?
- Are there any gaps in the knowledge of the subject?
- Have areas of further study been identified by other researchers that you may want to consider?
- Who are the significant research personalities in this area?
- Is there consensus about the topic?
- What aspects have generated significant debate on the topic?
- What methods or problems were identified by others studying in the field and how might they impact your research?
- What is the most productive methodology for your research based on the literature you have reviewed?
- What is the current status of research in this area?
- What sources of information or data were identified that might be useful to you?

If the literature review is part of a Ph.D. dissertation, this review will be comprehensive covering all research on the topic. As part of your research report, you need to cover the major work that has been done on the topic recently, but it is not necessary to try to identify all research on the subject.

### What is the purpose of a Literature Review?

The purpose of a literature review is to convey to the reader what knowledge and ideas have been established on a topic and what are the strengths and weaknesses. The literature review allows the reader to be brought up to date regarding the state of research in the field and familiarizes the reader with any contrasting perspectives and viewpoints on the topic. There are good reasons for beginning a literature review before starting a research paper. These reasons include:

- To see what has and has not been investigated.
- To develop general explanation for observed variations in a behavior or phenomenon.
- To identify potential relationships between concepts and to identify researchable hypotheses.
- To learn how others have defined and measured key concepts.
- To identify data sources that other researches have used.
- To develop alternative research projects.
- To discover how a research project is related to the work of others.

# How to do a literature search?

## 1. Developing a search strategy

- **Defining the topic** - In order to begin your literature review you must first define your research question. *What is the purpose? What does it mean? What are the key words? Are there other words which could be used, such as synonyms, variations in spelling? What do you already know about the topic? What is the scope? Do you need everything ever written in English on this topic, or just the last ten years?*
- **Compiling a list of keywords** - Before beginning a search for information, it is important to develop a search strategy that will most effectively locate useful, relevant information. This will often involve breaking down an essay or research question into: *keywords or phrases; entering your search; and evaluating your results to determine whether you need to employ various strategies to broaden, narrow or otherwise modify your research.*

Analyzing the topic of an essay question or research topic usually involves making a list of *keywords* or phrases. You will need to include all the key concepts or ideas contained within the essay or research question. It might be useful to include alternative ways of phrasing and expressing concepts and ideas. Think about both general terms and very specific terms for broadening and narrowing your search. The keyword or phrase is the basic unit of any search. You may find it helpful to consult subject dictionaries and encyclopedias, or a textbook glossary for the common terminology of the subject area. The use of an index and/or thesaurus is also advisable to establish the useful terms.

## 2. Identifying Resources - Information is available in a number of formats. It is important for you to understand the significance of various formats so that you know what will best suit your information requirements.

- Books
- Reference Materials
- Journals
- Conference Papers
- Dissertations
- Internet
- Indexes/Abstracts Printed
- Electronic Databases
- Government publications
- Theses

## 3. Examples of good Literature Reviews

- Boyanov, M. I., S. D. Kelly, K. M. Kemner, B. A. Bunker, J. B. Fein and D. A. Fowle. 2003. Adsorption of cadmium to *Bacillus subtilis* bacterial cell walls: a pH-dependent X-ray absorption fine structure spectroscopy study. *Geochimica et Cosmochimica Acta* Pages. 67, 18: 3299-3536.
- Chan, Steve. (1997) In Search of Democratic Peace: Problems and Promise. *Mershon International Studies Review*. 41,1:59-92.
- Goeser, C. 2003. On The Cross of The South: The Scottsboro Boys as Vernacular Christs in Harlem Renaissance Illustration. *International Review of African American Art*. 19,1: 19-27.
- Holt,-Robert-R. 2003. Some history of a methodological rediscovery. *American-Psychologist*. 58,5: 406-407.

db/09.03