The Literature Review – It is time to start!

The starting point for your dissertation is the literature review. This is your academic content. Even if you are still tinkering with the research question and aims and have not finished the weekend’s washing up, this is an area that you can get stuck into and can start straight away. You may feel that your research question is a little bit woolly and broad. You may still be wondering about how your research aims are going to answer your research question. However, even if everything is not wonderfully clear at the moment, as long as you are confident that the area that you have chosen for your research is something you wish to investigate, it is possible to identify some key tangible areas within your literature review about which you can start writing.

The literature review helps you to:

* search and identify literature relevant for your project
* bring the literature together in an organised way
* critically interpret the literature through a process of analysis
* present your interpretation in a way that shows you have a grasp of the key concepts related to your study.

Your research project should be an iterative process. It is something that, once you have started, you go over and over again. As you do so, your dissertation develops. You may find that every time you look at your research question, you could be asking questions such as ‘Is this what I mean?’ or ‘Should it really be this?’ It is this ongoing reflective, ever-changing progressive process of refining and rethinking everything that do that makes constructing a dissertation exciting. As it is iterative, it lives within you. Until the moment you hand it in, it is important to read, re-read, read again what you have re-read, until the point at which you are confident enough to submit your best efforts. It is this ongoing challenge that makes writing your dissertation really special. It is also special for your tutors as well, because we see how your ideas and thoughts develop over the year and share in your excitement as your project begins to take its final form. A literature review can be challenging, just like climbing a mountain.



The literature review is a really formative stage as it enables you to build, arrange and rearrange the blocks of knowledge.

Task 1

How would you describe your writing style?

A literature review is **not**:

* the place where you answer your research question
* a place where you make value judgements based upon the biases you have about answering the research question
* somewhere where your personal prejudices should abound.

A literature review **is** about:

* focusing your thinking on an area of investigation to create authoritative insights based upon your reading
* building, positioning and interpreting blocks of knowledge that you can use later
* showing how the thinking has developed for your topic of investigation over the last two or three decades or, in some cases, longer.

It could be useful to reflect on the following questions:

* In relation to the literature, what are the more important sources?
* What has been written about these sources?
* How are these sources positioned in relation to each other? That is, what are the similarities in interpretations and what are the differences?
* How has thinking changed in recent years?
* What influence have these researchers and ‘-ologists’ had upon developments in thinking?
* Is your interpretation fair and objective, unbiased and authoritative?

One important element of the literature review is making sure that, if you quote seminal sources, you do actually get hold of that source, even if that source is dated or aged, such as Maslow, Vygotsky or Piaget.

Task 2

Try to create a Mind Map for your study. Try to show the different literature sources that you will need to consult. On the map, try to identify the key concept or words that you will need to define, clarify, and search for literature within your study.

Task 3

Look at your library’s guide for searching databases. Using search terms related to your topic, explore the databases and see what you can find.

Potential difficulties

You may find that, irrespective of the nature of your study, there are too few references and too little information about your work. If this is the case, your research question is probably too narrow. You might need to broaden your enquiry. In contrast, you could find that you have too much information. In this case, you may be overwhelmed by the volume of the literature and want to narrow down your focus or area of enquiry.

Never give up chasing a source of literature. It is possible to order just about any literature source from the British Library – ask your librarians. One trick is to, whenever you find an article that is relevant to your research, look at the references of that piece of work and see if that author has used sources that would equally be of benefit for you.

Task 4

How strong/weak is your writing style? What are your strengths and weaknesses in constructing a review of literature? The quality of the literature review is largely determined by the communication skills of the researcher. For you, maybe the starting point is to write two or three paragraphs and then hand it to your tutor for feedback. At this early stage, it is important for tutors to be able to provide you with some feedback about your writing style.

Task 5

Look at the extract from the literature review below. What can you can you learn from how the interrelationships between the literature have been constructed?

It is accepted that the statements that individuals make can be the source of analysis within the social sciences (McAdams, 1997, Giddens, 1991, Baumeister, 1986, Ellenberger, 1970, Polkinghorne, 1988). McAdams (1985) in particular emphasises that: *‘Identity is a problem of unity and purpose in human life…* (that) *identity is a psycho-social issue*.’ Furthermore, Taylor (1981) emphasises that ‘*in order to have a sense of who we are we have to have a notion of who we have become and of where we are going*.’ It was Soros (1994) in his lecture delivered to MIT who, in his interpretation of reflexivity, emphasised the active relationship between thinking and reality in which ‘*reality helps shape the participants’ thinking and the participants’ thinking helps to shape reality*.’ So, by our definition, a reflexive relationship comes from both directions with the cause and effect acting upon each other in a professional situation that prompts other causes and effects (Needham and Lowe, 2007).

For many years the need to develop reflective practitioners for the classroom has been widely discussed within educational research (Hopkins, 1993, 2001, Rudduck and Hopkins, 1985, Rudduck, 1995, Carr and Kemmis, 1986). The same emphasis has not been given to reflexivity and yet, according to Leydesdorff (1994), in epistemological terms, reflexivity is the operationalisation of reflection as a recursive phenomenon, which develops and uses knowledge obtained through processes of reason and argument rather than through intuition.