

# 4

## SOURCING AND REVIEWING THE LITERATURE

<b>Research Reality Scenario</b> 	<b>When is a Literature Review a Literature Review?</b>
<p>Manuel is a final year undergraduate student on a BA Tourism Management course and his dissertation supervisor (Dr Alistair Brown) has asked him to come and see him in his office to get some feedback on the draft literature review he submitted a week ago.</p> <p>'Hello, Dr Brown, I hope you have some good news for me,' Manuel said when he arrived for the meeting.</p> <p>'Come in, Manuel,' replied Alistair, 'I have certainly got quite a lot to say to you.'</p> <p>'Oh dear,' thought Manuel, 'I don't like the sound of that!'</p> <p>Alistair began, 'First, Manuel, can you tell me what your understanding is of what a literature review should be?'</p> <p>Manuel replied, 'Well, I think the idea is to record what is known about the topic to show that I know this and to help me formulate appropriate questions for the research.'</p> <p>'OK, that's true,' Alistair said, 'but there is a bit more to it than that. I've read your draft and, although you have been very thorough in covering the breadth of the literature relating to your topic, it is too descriptive at present, with very little critical analysis or comment.'</p> <p>'I thought you might say that,' Manuel said, with an impending sense of more work to do! 'I know we have been told that the review should be critical,' he continued, 'but I'm not sure how to do that. Can you help me please?'</p> <p>'No problem, that's what I'm here for, Manuel,' Alistair said, helpfully. 'Let me try to help you think about this. First of all, think about the relationships between the issues of who, what, why, when and how in relation to the literature.'</p> <p>Manuel looked even more confused.</p>	

Alistair continued, 'At present, you cover most of these in your review, but in a descriptive and isolated manner. You tell me who has said what, when texts were published, how they arrived at their conclusions and even, sometimes, why. However, what is missing is the underlying analysis of any similarities or differences between the previous studies, a recognition of the philosophical roots of the different authors, whether or not there are any gaps or omissions in the literature you've reviewed, what the strengths and weaknesses of the studies are and how valid and reliable the methodologies used and results obtained might be.'

'Wow,' Manuel gasped, 'that sounds really difficult, I'm not sure I can do that.'

'Okay,' Alistair said, 'I know you can and I'm going to talk you through one part to show you that it's not as difficult as you seem to think.'

'Okay, that's great,' Manuel said, unconvincingly.

'So,' Alistair began, 'let's look at the section on customer satisfaction. Here you say Jones (1999) found in his study that facilities for children were not regarded as being as important as other factors by the questionnaire respondents, but Tolmey (2002) obtained different results from his questionnaire.'

'Yes, is that not being critical?' Manuel asked.

'No,' Alistair replied, 'You are merely reporting a difference without offering any suggestions as to why this was the case. For example, were the two studies conducted at the same time of year, were they undertaken in the same type of tourism business, did they have similar sample sizes and compositions, were the questionnaires administered in the same way?'

'Ah, I see what you mean,' Manuel replied. 'In the first study, a large proportion of the sample were women and family visitors, but in the second they were mainly student coach parties visiting the centres. Also, in the Jones study, the questionnaires were left on the restaurant tables for the visitors to complete, but, in Tolmey's study, a team of interviewers went around to interview the visitors and complete the questionnaires. So, I guess that the different results might have occurred because of differences between the samples and the ways the questionnaires were implemented.'

'Excellent, Manuel – now you're getting the hang of it,' Alistair said. 'If you look at the literature in that way, then you are going to get much more depth into your review and be able to identify and critically comment on the quality and significance of the previous work.'

'Thanks, Dr Brown,' Manuel said, gratefully. 'I see exactly what you mean. The next version will be much better and looking at it that way should also help me to decide what approach I should take in my empirical research.'

'Exactly, you really have got the hang of it now. I'll look forward to seeing the next version, Manuel', Alistair said, pleased that Manuel now understood what he needed to do.

## Key Decisions



## When Should I Stop My Search?

If you can give the appropriate response to the following questions then you may be in a position to consider stopping your search and beginning the next stage in the process:

- 'Have I searched all of the appropriate resources?
- Are there any gaps in the information sources searched?
- Have I used complex search statements as required by individual databases?
- Could any improvements be made to the searches?
- Have I identified all the relevant references? ... [and have I obtained all those of relevance?]
- Have I used both full-text and bibliographic databases?'

Source: Jesson et al. (2011: 30)

Note: Additional text in [ ] added by the author.

## Key Decisions



## Deciding What to Read First

As the well-known proverb says, each journey starts with a single step – but the question is what might be the appropriate first step to take? Which article, book or other type of information you have collected should you focus on to begin this journey? Jesson et al. (2011: 49) suggest a quite simple decision process to get this process started:

'The process is guided by two key decisions:

1. Is this reading relevant to your study? Is the information appropriate to the matter under consideration?

If yes,

Continue.

[If no, do not automatically discard it at this point because you never know exactly where your reading and thinking will take you as the process unfolds. You may not think it is relevant at the beginning but as you develop your knowledge and understanding of the topic you may find it relates to aspects you did not know of, or consider relevant at the beginning when your knowledge was necessarily imperfect.]

2. Does this reading add anything to the arguments or information that you have already completed?

If yes,

Continue.

If no,

Add the reference to your bibliographic list. Make a note that it has nothing new to contribute so far, add your reading date and reference details in case you want to return to it again. Then set it to one side in a colour-coded file. You will probably want to take another look at a later date for further examination, as your understanding and insight develops.'

*Note:* Additional text in [ ] added by the author.

## Key Concept



## The Value of Note-Taking

The five reasons for note-taking outlined below indicate the value of being actively engaged with your material as you read it by beginning to 'process' it as you go along:

- To identify and understand the main points of what you read.
- To develop a way of rephrasing material in your own words.
- To help you reflect and think, concentrate on what is important and to recall easily what you have read.
- To make connections across texts and authors so that you can rearrange them for writing the review.
- To develop your own comprehension of the topic.

*Source:* Jesson et al. (2011: 59)

## Technique Tip



## Getting to Grips with the Literature

- How do the authors of the articles define their topic? [Who are the key influencers and researchers in the field?]
- What key terms and phrases do they employ? [Are these really different or just saying the same thing in a different way?]
- How have other researchers approached your topic? [What have their philosophical and methodological stances been?]
- What has been the history of research on this topic? [Is it something that has attracted attention only very recently or has a long track record; has interest increased or decreased in more recent times?]
- What are the research controversies within this literature? [What are these based on – fundamentally different philosophical and/or conceptual approaches or alternative methodologies?]
- Where is there agreement and disagreement? [What form does this take, is it a matter of methodological choice and/or implementation, interpretation, strength of evidence in terms of its validity and/or reliability?]
- What specific questions have been asked? [What questions have not been asked and should be?]
- What has been found out? [What has not been found out, discovered or proven?]
- What findings seem to be most relevant? [Why is this the case, what makes some more relevant than others?]
- What remains to be done, that is, what burning questions still need to be addressed concerning your topic? [What has not been answered, either at all or incompletely?]
- Where do you find gaps in the literature? [Are there conceptual gaps or are these to be found in the ways that previous research has been designed and/or implemented?]

Source: Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006: 56)

Note: Additional text in [ ] added by the author.

## Technique Tip



## Structure of an Annotated Bibliography

- [1] The full bibliographic citation containing all the information required for whatever referencing style you are using.
- [2] A series of keywords that indicate its focus – in the case of academic journal articles these will already have been provided in the original.
- [3] A concise summary of what the material says, including any critical comment on its value. For example – ‘This is the third study conducted by Bond that further develops his model of labour turnover in the tourism industry through additional empirical evidence gathered from a survey of small tourism businesses in Spain. There are some concerns about the sampling strategy used (convenience) and the size of sample (n = 20) he bases his data analysis and conclusions on.’
- [4] An indication of the standing of the author and the publication itself. For example – ‘Bond is a well known and respected researcher and has published widely on this topic and this paper has been published in a well known peer-reviewed journal.’
- [5] An identification of any links the material has to other material you have in your literature base. This can be as simple as merely indicating the basic reference/s to the other material or it could be more extensive to include an indication of the nature of these links. For example – ‘This material links to Bond’s two previous studies on the same topic and takes his ideas further. It also contrasts with the studies by Largo and Goldfinger who adopt different methodologies and heavily criticise Bond’s approach.’
- [6] A judgement concerning its value to your work. For example – ‘This illustrates one strand of the approaches taken to investigating this issue and, in conjunction with Bond’s other work and that of Burgess, illustrates one of the three main approaches researchers seem to have taken to this topic. In that sense it is an important one to include in the study but some care should be taken with its methodology which seems to have some potential deficiencies.’

## Technique Tip



## Evaluating Your Sources

### **Authority and Credibility**

Who is the author or authors?

Who are the key players?

Where are they from, i.e. what type of institution?

Are they being sponsored and, if so, by whom?

Could any sponsorship or funding they are receiving be seen to influence their work and results?

Are they well known in the field?

Do they have an established track record of producing high quality work?

Are they recognised and cited by their peers?

Are they publishing their work in the leading peer-reviewed journals in the field?

Is the language used appropriate, i.e. is it logical, balanced and as objective as might be expected?

### **Accuracy and Believability**

Is the research design appropriate and sound?

Has it been implemented appropriately?

What is the nature of the sampling strategy and the sample achieved?

Are the data analysis techniques appropriate and have they been used correctly?

Does the author address issues of validity and reliability in a sound way?

Are any ethical issues recognised and dealt with appropriately?

Does the work build upon previous work on the topic in a logical and consistent manner?

Does it cite the key researchers, concepts and findings from prior studies?

### **Value and Significance**

What does it add to the knowledge and understanding on the topic?

Is its contribution minor or major, is it a breakthrough or just confirmation of previous findings?

What is the nature of the evidence used to support claims and propositions – is it based on empirical evidence, conjecture, anecdote or logical argument?

How convincing is this evidence – is it extensive, strong, logically consistent or not?

How well does it deal with counter-arguments – are these comprehensively refuted with compelling evidence and/or argument?

Does it recognise and comment on errors and omissions (nothing is perfect!) and indicate what the implications of the results are?

Are any new questions generated by the work articulated clearly?



As this is one of the tasks that students often find somewhat bewildering and difficult to get their heads around it may be helpful for you to use two links in the Video Links section of the Companion Website ([study.sagepub.com/brotherton](http://study.sagepub.com/brotherton)) that deal specifically with this issue of evaluating and synthesising the literature.



For additional perspectives on planning, conducting and writing up the literature review go to the Companion Website ([study.sagepub.com/brotherton](http://study.sagepub.com/brotherton)) where you will find, in the Web Links section, a series of links to other websites and documents providing hints, tips and guidance on these issues, and, in the Video Links section, a video providing a student view of the experience of the literature review process.