Sage Research Methods

Reviewing the Literature

Reviewing the Literature

Introduction

This stage will:

- Explain what a literature review is and why you need to do one
- Define the steps in a literature search and a literature review
- Give you an overview of where to look for appropriate literature

The literature review is an important part of every research project. This section takes you through the literature review process, explaining the reasons for reviewing the literature and differentiation between the types of literature available.

Why Do I Need to Do a Literature Review?

You are almost certainly not the first to investigate your topic! You need to be aware of what others have written on the general area of your research and even on your specific issue. You will need to draw on their work to construct your own project. But you will also need to distinguish your own work from theirs. Originality is important, and for PhDs and academic publication it is vital.

The "Literature Review" and "the Problematic"

In the natural sciences, the "[literature review](#)" is the term used to describe an agreed body of knowledge, which the researcher will set out before building on that base in their project.

In the social sciences there are more likely to be different approaches and different accounts of the information you need for your research. So we use the term "the problematic" to indicate the issue around which these arguments have developed and these articles/books have been written.

In social science a literature review always includes the sense of the issues being contested, not only in terms of what we know, but how we know it.

What Types of Literature Should I Use in My Review?

There are several different types of literature available and you will probably draw on all of them. The ones you will refer to in your literature review fall into two main areas.

Academic Work

This is the work done by specialists in the field. Their writings will become your **secondary sources** on which you will draw in your own research. These are usually published, either in printed or e-book format. The main types are **monographs**—books describing a particular piece of research in detail (e.g., a PhD thesis)—and **articles in academic journals**.

Grey Literature

This refers to written materials which fall between **secondary sources** and **primary sources**. Mostly these are documents which use social science research

methods but are written for a non-academic purpose. Examples are:

- **Government reports**, which include policy recommendations
- **Private sector research**, often marketing research, which is produced for business purposes
- **Surveys** to provide material for planning enquiries.

The use of grey literature in social science is not new: Karl Marx used Royal Commission government reports in writing *Capital*.

Do I Need to Reference the Literature I Review?

In referring to academic research and grey materials it is important to cite all of your sources, explicitly and accurately. You must never, ever, reproduce chunks from any text without acknowledgement. To do so is to **plagiarize**. You can avoid plagiarizing by accident by always highlighting or using inverted commas around direct quotations when making notes from your sources.

Do My Primary Sources Count as "Literature"?

Primary sources are the documents on which you do your original research. They are the fresh evidence that you bring to the field and, as such, they are not regarded as "literature" for the purposes of the literature review, which deals with material that is already published. Your primary sources will be described in your section on research methods and processes.

Read more about referencing

What Is Grey Literature?

Grey literature is a term used to refer to documentary materials which lie somewhere between traditional, academically produced secondary literature and "raw" primary sources. Typically, it is the product of research by an organization, often one within the realm of governance.

An Example

Grey literature is often found in the public sector, for example, the material produced in relation to a process of hospital reconfiguration. This deals with the major reorganization of the form of delivery of secondary health services in a locality and will typically include both policy documents of a traditional form and reports on research done in relation to the issue.

The policy documents outline rationales and present proposal. They can be regarded as traditional primary sources.

The research reports, often done as part of a process of public consultation, have been generated on the basis of social investigations. They often include surveys, focus group discussions, and written representations from the public which have been summarized and used as a source of thematically focused quotations. The research reports are grey literature.

Is Grey Literature a Primary or Secondary Source?

Grey literature should be treated as both a secondary and a primary source. It can contribute to the literature review. But it can also be used as the basis of empirical

findings which contribute to the actual research process itself.

How Do I Do a Literature Search?

There are two main approaches to doing literature searches: searching using a search term and searching citations, both of which rely on the availability of online databases. Examples of databases include:

- Firstsearch
- Web of Science
- Science Direct
- Google Scholar

You usually get to these via your institution's library. However, Google Scholar is a publically available database. These databases have different strengths and attributes, but all have good help facilities which will guide you through using them.

Searching a Database Using a Search Term

Search terms can be:

- **An author name**: You know somebody who has written on the topic of interest to you and you want to know what they have said.
- **A keyword or phrase which relates to your topic**: Keywords can generally be found in either:
  - The topic of the published work. Usually this means the word or phrase will appear in the abstract of a journal article.

- The title of the piece. Tying keywords to titles will produce fewer "hits" but if the keyword is in the title, then you can be pretty sure that the piece will be relevant for you.

Typically, you can refine your search in various ways to reduce the number of hits to manageable proportions. You can do this by specifying a range of years for publication and/or the general area of work in which you are interested by discipline or field.

Doing a Citation Search Using a Database

Here you start by locating a published piece of work in a database and then the search engine will locate all the subsequent published works in the database which have cited the original piece. This allows you to find related work which may be useful for you.

[Search for resources about doing a literature search](#)

How Do I Do a Literature Review?

Getting Started

If you have chosen your topic yourself, you may have a good general knowledge of the subject area. If you are a professional social researcher who has been given the topic, then you need to start by building up your general knowledge.

Scholarship

Scholarship refers to organized critical overviews of the literature on the subject. These can be divided into four kinds, beginning with the most basic.

Textbooks and encyclopedias.

These are sometimes called tertiary literature, and provide a useful starting point. However, you should note that it's not usual to cite them in your review.

"Big books."

Overviews of the subject written by eminent scholars are more useful. You will always find something like this, either as a single-authored book, or in the editorial introduction/conclusion to a large collection on a given subject. Ask your supervisor for recommendations of the big books in your topic area if you don't already know what they are. You may cite these in your literature review.

Edited collections.

These are particularly useful and take three forms.

- **Special issues of journals**: These are very valuable as sources. They contain sets of articles on a theme, usually with an introduction by the editor(s) which summarizes and considers the topic as a whole.
- **Edited collections**: These have more content and a wider remit than special issues of journals. They include examples of empirical work and overview articles by editors, as well as scholarly articles debating issues around a subject.

- **Edited multiple-volume collections of previously published material**: These draw lots of material together and have excellent scholarly introductions and overviews. You'll find these in your library.

Overviews by government department and other agencies.

These can be found through web searches.

How Do I Write Up My Literature Review?

In the final written version of your research it is likely that you will be required to include a chapter based on your literature review. The best way to organize this is **thematically**. Just as you identify themes when dealing with the findings of your research, you should find thematic sub-headings to discuss the literature you have read.

This will help you to conclude your chapter with a **set of questions** which emerge from the review and which will be addressed in your own research. Your literature review thus provides you with a **preliminary structure** for organizing your research findings.

Search for resources about literature reviews

Read more about writing up a literature review

What Makes a Successful Literature Review?

Here are eight steps toward completing a successful literature review.

1. **Search terms**: Formulate appropriate search terms as the basis for your literature searches.
2. **Database search tools**: Use database search tools to identify relevant journal articles and related materials.
3. **Key publications**: Identify a series of key publications in your area and use these as the bases for citation reference searches.
4. **Web search tools**: Use web search tools to identify pieces of interest, in particular grey literature, relevant to you.
5. **Scanning**: Scan abstracts of articles, reviews of books, executive summaries of government reports, and other summaries of published work to determine if you need to read the piece in full.
6. **Reading**: Read the pieces you have identified and make notes from them.
7. **Thematic organization**: Use these notes as the basis of a thematic organization of your literature review.
8. **Writing the review**: Write the review, based on the thematic organization, in such a way that you can construct one or more interesting research questions which you will address in your investigation.

How Do I Keep a Bibliography?

All reporting of scientific research must include a bibliography. It is vital that you keep a good record of everything you have read and will use in writing up your research, so that you are able to include it in your bibliography. Here are some

things to remember:

- It is essential to cite every source you mention, and not just the sources from which you have directly quoted.
- It is not necessary to cite sources you have read when doing your research but have not used in writing it up.
- It goes without saying that if you have used something to shape your ideas and work it should be mentioned. Due tribute must be paid to those whose work has helped you. Using ideas and/or findings without crediting their original source is a form of plagiarism.

How Do I Cite and Reference My Sources?

There are a few different referencing styles that can be used in writing up your literature review and research findings. You should check with your supervisor or with colleagues to determine the convention at your university or in your discipline.

Are There Any Tools Which Can Help Me Keep a Bibliography?

There are tools you can use to help you keep a systematic bibliography. The best known and most widely used of these is *Endnote* and it is well worthwhile acquiring this (many universities have site licenses for it) and learning how to use it.

Tip: Don't postpone starting your bibliography

Some effort early on avoids a lot of work later. You can enter citations into your bibliography as you are actually writing up your dissertation/thesis/report.

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Read more about writing a [bibliography](#)

How Does the Literature Review Differ From Doing Desk Research?

There is an overlap between doing a literature review and doing original research. When you use the same methods as a literature review, but are looking at the materials as part of your main research, this is referred to as [desk research](#). You may well be working largely with grey literature, which can be both part of your secondary source material and at the same time be a primary resource as evidence.

Finding Your Materials

You can find materials for your desk research in much the same way as you would for a literature review.

Traditionally, conducting primary research with documents involved finding the physical documents in a library and reading them there. You may still have to do this with older, local, documents but a very great deal of material is now available online. Much material will have been originally created in web form. For example, all UK government documents and most documents produced by local government are available in web form and the same is true for almost all national governments, most local governments, and international organizations. Older material

has now often been digitized and will be available to you online.

[Search for resources about desk research](#)

[Search for resources about literature reviews](#)

Read more about systematic review in [desk research](#)

How Can I Use the Internet in My Research?

The Internet is an extraordinarily useful tool for research, and nearly everyone is experienced in using it. However, because it's used so often to look things up in everyday life, it's easy to become blasé about it. It's important to remember that you need to treat Internet sources with the same caution that you apply to other sources.

Ways You Can Use the Internet in Your Research

To help you in your literature search.
Online search engines and databases can help you find the documents and data you need to conduct your literature review.

Locating and downloading documents.
In the past, documents would have been held in a physical form in libraries, but they are now usually available on the web. Documents can include:

- Grey literature

- Reports

- Minutes of meetings produced by governments and international organizations

- Digital versions of older documents which pre-date the Internet.

Locating and downloading secondary data.

A large amount of secondary data are available online, both contemporary and historical, from various data repositories. The ready availability of such data has transformed the character of much quantitative social research. Bodies which provide such data include:

- The UK's [Office for National Statistics](#)

- [Eurostat](#)

- [World Health Organization](#)

Secondary qualitative is also increasingly available via archives such as:

- The [UK Data Archive](#)

- [Mass Observation Archive](#)

- [ICPSR Data Archive](#)

Using the Internet as an object of research, in its own right.

If the Internet is a topic of your research, you might find it useful to look at:

- Blogs

- Discussion groups, forums and lists

- Images

- The web presence of various institutions. For example, you can see how a particular global city region is represented on the net.

Using digital metadata in your research.

If you have access, you can use metadata (data describing data) from the web as a basis of social network analysis.

The Need for Care in Using Internet Sources

The Internet is very useful for researchers because of its open nature, which has encouraged academic and other bodies to make materials freely available that once were difficult and sometimes expensive to access. However the Internet's very openness raises issues about truth and authority.

Truth?

Care must be taken in using Internet sources as a true representation of reality. This is no different from the care you must take with any representation (re-pre-sentation) of reality, but there is so much unverified information on the Internet that you must be particularly careful.

Authority?

You should also take care with any authoritative statement derived from an Internet source. You should test all authoritative statements, but the Internet's openness means that provenance is always an issue.

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https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526408518