

## Getting Started on Your Literature Review

### A General Guide for Postgraduate Research Students

*There is no one single correct method to writing a literature review. Therefore, this resource is a guide only. Check with your supervisor/lecturer/school to ascertain whether there are any specific requirements for your literature review before proceeding.*

#### What is a Literature Review?

A literature review is an examination of the research that has been conducted in a particular field of study. Hart (1998) defines it as:

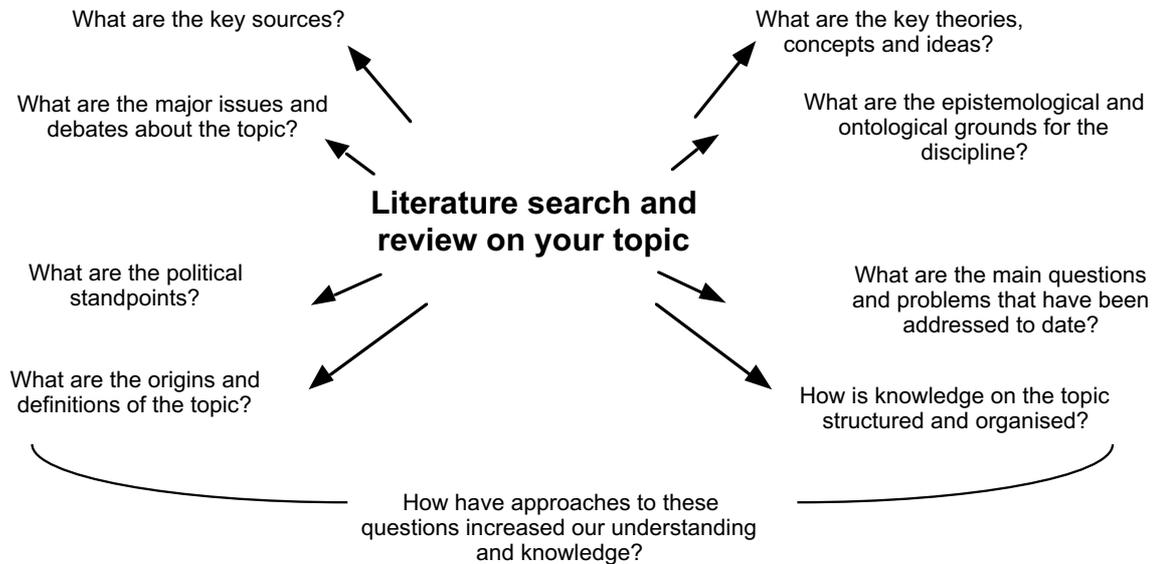
- The **selection** of available documents (both published and unpublished) on the topic, which contain information, ideas, data and evidence. [This selection is] written from a particular standpoint to fulfil certain aims or express certain views on the nature of the topic and how it is to be investigated, and
- The effective **evaluation** of these documents in relation to the research being proposed (p. 13).

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

- To demonstrate your scholarly ability to identify relevant information and to outline existing knowledge.
- To identify the 'gap' in the research that your study is attempting to address, positioning your work in the context of previous research and creating a 'research space' for your work.
- To evaluate and synthesise the information in line with the concepts that you have set yourself for the research.
- To produce a rationale or justification for your study.

Initially, you may read quite broadly on the topic to enrich your understanding of the field. This is useful for refining your topic and establishing the perspective that your research will take. For example, reading broadly may help you work out where there are gaps in the research, which may provide you with a niche for your research. It may also enable you to establish how your research extends or enhances the studies already done.

However, remember that the literature review needs to relate to and explain your research question. Although there may seem to be hundreds of sources of information that appear pertinent, once you have your question you will be able to refine and narrow down the scope of your reading.



### Some of the questions the review of the literature can answer

Source: Hart, C. (1998) *Doing a literature review: Releasing the social science research imagination*, Thousand Oaks, Sage, p. 14.

## What do I need to be able to do in order to write a literature review?

*Please be aware that the following steps are not necessarily linear and you may have to revisit them at various points. Remember that undertaking your literature review is really an on-going process throughout your thesis. However, there will be times when you focus more specifically on reviewing the literature.*

- **Identify your research question.** This is essential in helping you direct and frame your reading.
  - **Identify and locate appropriate information.** Consider searching library catalogues, data bases, CD Roms, media releases, research publications etc.—these will depend on your discipline.  
 If you are a postgraduate and are unsure about how to use the library's print, electronic or internet resources effectively, then make an appointment for a Research Consultation with the UNSW library (this can be done online at <<http://www.library.unsw.edu.au/prac.html>>). This service is available to postgraduate research students and academic staff. A PRAC consultation will help you to develop and refine your research skills in the area of print, electronic and/or internet resources.
  - **Read and critically evaluate the information that you locate.** Examine its strengths and weaknesses in relation to your research. Take notes of not only the information that you read, but also your thoughts about this information. This will help you draw your ideas together when you start writing your literature review section. (For effective note-making strategies, see the Learning Centres study resource on notetaking).
  - **File and store your readings and notes.** Use an effective method that lets you retrieve information quickly and easily. Remember that there is no one 'right' way of organising your materials. However, it is important to know the literature that you have found and where you have stored it, so that you can access it quickly and easily. Use a program like EndNote <<http://www.endnote.com>> to help you organise and store your notes relating to the readings that you have undertaken.
  - **Plan, organise and write critically about the literature that you have located.** You will need to establish which literature is most pertinent to your review and be able to synthesise and critique the relevant materials. Don't underestimate the planning stage. Having a sense of the overall organisation of your literature review may help expedite the process. Some people find that in the initial stages, drawing diagrams of how the literature fits together is very useful in providing a 'big picture' of the information to be incorporated.
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## How could I write my Literature Review?

When writing your literature review, it is essential to remember that it will only be completed when your thesis is almost finished, because new research and publications are constantly being produced. At some stage you will have to be happy with what you have and leave it at that; however, you will be continually adding to your review and will probably rewrite it a number of times.

It is always invaluable to read the literature reviews in other theses. These will provide possible structural models for your own literature review. The UNSW library now has many theses available on-line, so it is easy to locate examples of current theses in your area of research. Check out the UNSW library website for the Australian Digital Thesis database <<http://adt.caul.edu.au>>. Another useful strategy is to examine how literature reviews are undertaken in journal articles, although these are generally much shorter.

It is important that your literature review has a logical and coherent structure, and that this structure is clearly apparent to the reader. It is a good idea to let your readers know exactly how the review is organised. Although the suggestions (at right) are commonly used in structuring the literature in a review, these methods are by no means the only ways of organising material. Remember that the way that you choose to organise your review will largely depend upon the type of information that you have gathered and that some literature reviews use a combination of structural approaches.

## Discussing and Evaluating the Literature

### *Critically examine the literature*

The literature review needs to critically examine the texts that relate to your research question, rather than to just list what you have located. Therefore, you must link the literature to your research question, demonstrating how it supports or extends the topic or the existing knowledge in the area. You should also highlight the strengths, weaknesses and omissions of the literature, providing a critique of the research. Hence, the language used in a literature review is often evaluative and demonstrates your perspectives of the literature in relation to your question.

### *Make your 'voice' clear*

Your 'voice', that is, your perspective, position or standpoint, should be clearly identifiable in the literature review, as in the thesis as a whole. However, in the literature review because you are writing about other people's work it is easy for your own 'voice' to be lost. The literature review then reads like a mixture of different tones and arguments. It is important that, firstly, your theoretical position is clearly and strongly stated and that your critical evaluations are an integral part of this. Secondly, it is important that your language indicates your own or other writers' attitudes to the question or issue. Some ways of using language to do this are outlined on the next page.

## References

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## Some Possible Ways of Structuring a Literature Review

### ***Chronological organisation***

The discussion of the research /articles is ordered according to an historical or developmental context.

### ***The 'Classic' studies organisation***

A discussion or outline of the major writings regarded as significant in your area of study. (Remember that in nearly all research there are 'benchmark' studies or articles that should be acknowledged).

### ***Topical or thematic organisation***

The research is divided into sections representing the categories or conceptual subjects for your topic. The discussion is organised into these categories or subjects.

### ***Inverted pyramid organisation***

The literature review begins with a discussion of the related literature from a broad perspective. It then deals with more and more specific or localised studies which focus increasingly on the specific question at hand.

In 1984, Jenny Cushman, in her **perceptive** article, 'The Chinese community in Australian historiography' made a passionate plea for historians to move away from studies of Australian attitudes to "relocate the Chinese experience within the Chinese community itself". She further urged researchers to investigate the way Chinese customs, legal notions and kinship relations were adapted to the Australian physical and social environment. **It is tempting to credit** many of the succeeding changes to Cushman's appeal. However, the new approaches **must** be viewed within the context of the changing tide of historiography and the impact of 'multiculturalism'.

**Attitude marker:** words or phrases that indicate a writer's assessment of or attitude to an issue

**Emphatic expressions:** Words or phrases which relate to the strength of the claim or to your degree of confidence in what is said.

**Hedging expression:** word or phrases which make statements about the degree of certainty, possibility or probability of a question

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 .....  
 But to say this is to point to wider **implications** for history making in Australia. The Eurocentric histories of the past **cannot simply be** corrected by including the 'Chinese', especially if clear ethnic separations based on assumed single identities are maintained. **It is necessary** to go beyond Orientalist contrasts between us and them, Australian and Chinese, and to engage in a re-examination of sites of difference and dialogue. These sites will show the need to envisage multiple identities. They **may** also **sometimes point** to shared experiences of a shared world. Separate histories of ethnic peoples are not enough, especially if they serve to contain and exclude these peoples. Instead there is a need for a new synthesis in Australian history. The crucial need for historians is to personally engage with the contemporary politics of difference.

**Relational marker (underlined):** words or phrases that indicate, explicitly or implicitly, the writer's relationship to the audience or the scholarly community in which they are writing.

**Text source:** Ryan, J. (1997). Chinese Australian history. In W. Hudson & G. Bolton (eds) *Creating Australia: Changing Australian history*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney.(pp. 75, 77)

NB: Technically emphatic expressions, attitude markers and relational markers are also hedging expressions, but they are described here in terms of their primary function.

*There are numerous resources at the Independent Learning Centre and in the library that can help support you in the writing of your literature review. Please remember that there is no one way of writing a literature review and that it is essential that you discuss your chosen approach with your supervisor.*

Every effort has been made to locate and acknowledge sources of information. Please let us know if we have inadvertently plagiarised material.  
 Written and compiled by T. Ferfolja and L. Burnett, © The Learning Centre, UNSW, 2002.