Literature Reviews – the Basics

What it is .... A literature review is a discussion of what has been published on a topic by reputable and peer reviewed researchers and how your research is positioned in relation to these. It may be narrative, chronological or systematic (scientific evidence based research) in nature. In a nutshell a lit review must:

- be related directly to the research question you are addressing
- collect results into a overview of what is and what is not yet known
- identify arguments and areas of controversy
- formulate questions that need further research.

....and what is isn’t. A lit review is not just a list describing the research published to date nor is it just a set of summaries of journal articles. A literature review is not data collection; that is a literature search. A critical assessment of the sources is required for a lit review: see below.

Where should it be located? A literature review is usually part of the earlier work done on a proposal, dissertation or thesis. It may be a chapter in its own right or part of the introduction to your writing.

Why do I need to do one? The purpose in writing a lit review is to set out what research, knowledge, arguments and ideas have been established on your topic and what their strengths and weaknesses are. You also need to state how your own research topic supports or challenges previous research.
Any advantages to the process? Doing a lit review allows you to demonstrate research skills to your tutor or supervisor, namely:

- that you have expanded your knowledge in your research area
- that you have the information seeking skills to search, find, and apply relevant research resources efficiently using databases, journals, subject gateways and other hardcopy and e-resources.
- that you are able to identify and critically appraise biased v. valid studies

So where do I start?

Consider the following issues before you begin:

- Have I defined my research question or research statement?
- What is the scope of my research? (timeline, academic level, limits).
- What type of research is in progress i.e. method and methodology, policy, theory, quantitative, qualitative, ethnographic or action research.

During your information resources search aka literature search think about:

- Are the number of academic sources found relevant and appropriate to the length and level of the thesis?
- Have the key authors and current themes/trends been identified?
- Is the information search wide enough to ensure the relevant material is found or is it too narrow? Has irrelevant or discredited material been excluded?
- Is there a gap appearing in the research to date?
- Any ethical issues to consider?

Your checklist when reviewing the literature retrieved can include:

- How does the material contribute to a wider understanding of the problem?
- How does the material relate to your developing research?
- Is the argument or research statement clearly defined?
- Has the work been cited by other authors to date? If so how often? By whom? Is it considered cutting edge or a key research work?
When writing up your literature review remember:

Organise your material into sections that present themes, arguments, issues or trends including relevant theory and practice. Don’t try to list all the material published – that can be included in your bibliography - annotated if necessary. Remember to synthesise, evaluate, critically assess and discuss the literature in the light of your own research question. Keep in mind questions such as:

- Have studies contrary to my perspective been discussed?
- Have I compared and contrasted the information found using a checklist?
- How does the material relate to my own research question/statement

Need some more detailed help with academic writing? A useful online guide is:

1. OWL Online Writing Lab  [https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/4/](https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/4/)

The following hardcopy titles are available to get started


Textbooks are available in the Library dealing with research methods, academic writing and systematic reviews at the 001.042, 300.72 and 808 shelf numbers. Specific health and clinical literature reviews and evidence based research guides are available at 610.72.