

CHAPTER 1

What Is a Literature Review?

Sue is a doctoral student in social sciences. She is about to complete her coursework and is thinking about her next step, the dissertation work. For the last 7 years, she has worked as a social worker in an inner-city community. Although she is not sure about her focus, she knows that she wants to explore ways to better utilize community resources. Her vision is to help individuals and families escape poverty, but she is also thinking of finding ways to strengthen the relationships among families and local organizations.

Sue is all fired up about this topic but feels overwhelmed by the many issues involved. She realizes that the topic is too wide and she needs to carve out a focus that is not too overwhelming but not too limited in scope. Her advisor praises her choice of topic but suggests that she read more about theories and research studies related to it. Sue remembers that she wrote a paper about social capital theory which asserts that shared values and social relationships, as well as investment in community sources, produce future benefits for its members. She believes this theory may apply to her future research and at the same time she feels that critical theory—and perhaps also critical race theory—is relevant as well. Her advisor suggests that to gain in-depth knowledge about theories that are relevant to her topic she should start working on her literature review. Reading the literature, the advisor noted, will help Sue narrow the topic of her dissertation research. The literature review will inform her about what is already known about the topic and identify areas where new knowledge is needed, as well as help in designing her own study.

Sue's example illustrates that carrying out a comprehensive literature review is a required step in any research project. First, a researcher cannot conduct the study

without gaining a deep understanding of the research topic and learning from the work of other scholars and researchers in the field (Creswell, 2018). Without being aware of what is already known, novice researchers might explore a research question that was previously investigated exhaustively, inadvertently replicate studies done before, or repeat past methodological mistakes. Moreover, writing a good literature review allows researchers to demonstrate the intellectual depth and scholarship needed for making independent decisions that are part and parcel of conducting any research project.

Like Sue, you may find yourself ready to start your term paper, thesis, dissertation, or grant proposal and wondering about what a literature review is, why it is needed, how it contributes to your study, and what steps are involved in conducting it. In this book, we answer these questions and guide you through the process of conducting the review.

In this chapter, we offer an introduction to the process that will allow you to successfully start the challenging and exciting journey of writing the literature review. We begin with a discussion highlighting the purposes and contributions of literature reviews, followed by an overview of the literature review process. Next, we suggest ways of constructing a plan of action that will enhance your ability to finish the work within your time frame. The final section in the chapter includes a short description of each chapter in the book.

WHAT IS A LITERATURE REVIEW?

A literature review is a systematic examination of the scholarly literature about one's topic. It critically analyzes, evaluates, and synthesizes research findings, theories, and practices by scholars and researchers that are related to an area of focus. In reviewing the literature, the writer should present a comprehensive, critical, and accurate understanding of the current state of knowledge; compare different research studies and theories; reveal gaps in current literature; and indicate what needs to be done to advance what is already known about the topic of choice.

A literature review may be a stand-alone or embedded in the study. A *stand-alone* review is a self-contained document that comprises an extensive review of the literature and provides a broad overview of the current knowledge about a particular topic. While a stand-alone review may serve as a basis for future research, the review itself is not followed by a research study. Examples of this kind of review may be found in term papers for graduate and postgraduate class assignments; entire theses or dissertations, especially those that are theoretically or philosophically based; and chapters in a book or review articles. In fact there are journals in different disciplines (e.g., *Annual Review of Economics*, *Review of*

Educational Research Annual Review of Sociology, Annual Review of Organizational Psychology, and Organizational Behavior) that are dedicated to publishing stand-alone literature review articles.

A more common kind of literature review is an *embedded* review that is an integral part of a study and serves as the context for the issue being explored. This type of review provides a direct connection between the sources and the problem to be studied and it has implications for the design of the future studies. The writer demonstrates how the proposed study expands the existing knowledge and contributes to a fuller understanding of the topic. This kind of literature review serves as a foundation for studies such as theses, dissertations, research projects, or grant proposals. In addition, an embedded literature review provides an introduction to scholarly journal articles, or policy and position papers.

Both kinds of literature review—the stand-alone and embedded—highlight the evolutionary and cumulative nature of knowledge creation. The progress of knowledge building depends on trustworthy interpretation of past research and scholarship. Schulman (1999) calls the ability to learn from those who came before us *generativity*, and argues that this ability is one of the hallmarks of scholarship. Only by gaining generativity and situating our work meaningfully within the pre-existing scholarly milieu are we able to create valuable and relevant studies and accomplish one of research's main goals—expansion of our collective knowledge (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). Ultimately, “Good research is good because it advances our collective understanding” (Boote & Beile, 2005, p. 3).

While the process of writing either a stand-alone or embedded literature review is largely similar, our focus in this book is mainly on conducting a literature review that is an integral part of research projects, theses, dissertations, grant proposals, or policy papers.

THE PURPOSES AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF A LITERATURE REVIEW

Before we describe the purposes of the literature review and its contributions to your research, we want to emphasize what a literature review is *not*.

▶ A literature review is not an annotated bibliography where you summarize and describe individual sources on your topic. Rather, a literature review synthesizes sources that relate to particular themes and guiding concepts. The difference between an annotated bibliography and a literature review is, according to Axelrod and Cooper (2012), similar to the difference between still pictures and a movie. A movie contains still pictures, but it connects them into a meaningful story line.

▶ A literature review is not a presentation of your own ideas, arguments, and

assumptions. Rather, your claims should be based on studies conducted by researchers or theories put forth by authoritative scholars.

- ▶ A literature review is not a position paper. As you review the current literature, you should not cherry-pick sources that support your point of view and overlook references that represent opposing perspectives. You may share your position and provide the rationale for embracing it, but at the same time you should be open to acknowledging the value of different approaches and perspectives, compare and contrast different positions, and present the pros and cons of each.
- ▶ A literature review should not simply mirror the current literature in the field (Boote & Beile, 2005). Instead, it should aim to present the current knowledge through a fresh and creative perspective that contributes to new thinking and understanding of the topic being investigated.

Once we understand what a literature review is not, we can now turn to considering the many purposes of a good and rigorous review. In the following section we provide a list of potential purposes of a literature review. We do not rank these purposes hierarchically according to their importance; rather, we perceive all of them to be equally valuable. You may consider the following purposes according to the specific nature of your study and decide which ones should be addressed and the level of emphasis assigned to those you have chosen. Following Ravitch and Riggan (2017), we divided the purposes into three major categories: (1) purposes that set the context for the study, (2) purposes that inform the research design and methodology, and (3) purposes that identify areas for advancing scholarship in the field.

Purposes That Set the Context for the Study

- ▶ Clarify and define terms and key concepts used in the context of your study.
- ▶ Situate the topic within the historical background of your research area.
- ▶ Set up a theoretical framework for your study and contrast perspectives, ideas, and approaches.
- ▶ Recognize influential researchers and scholars and seminal studies that have shaped your field of study.
- ▶ Place the topic within a contemporary context and demonstrate knowledge of state-of-the-art developments.
- ▶ Discuss current debates, controversies, and questions.
- ▶ Identify relationships between ideas and theories and their practical implications.

Purposes That Inform the Research Design and Methodology

- ▶ Narrow the research problem to make it feasible and doable within your context and constraints.
- ▶ Refine the focus of your study or even modify the topic of your research.
- ▶ Identify and critique methodological assumptions and research techniques employed in previous studies.
- ▶ Uncover methodologies and instrumentation that may help you design your own study and develop your data collection and analysis strategies.
- ▶ Highlight deficiencies in previous research that may help you avoid similar flaws and errors.
- ▶ Prevent unintentional duplication of previously conducted studies or, alternatively, extend existing research to new methodology, settings, and participants.
- ▶ Confirm the “researchability” (Hart, 1998) of the research question.
- ▶ Ensure avoidance of insignificant or trivial research.

Purposes That Identify Areas for Advancing the Scholarship in the Field

- ▶ Summarize existing research in ways that allow new perspectives or interpretations to emerge.
- ▶ Justify the significance of your investigation by establishing the importance of the issue your research is addressing.
- ▶ Point out gaps in existing research and illustrate areas of concern or omissions that still need to be explored.
- ▶ Demonstrate how your research is linked to the studies reviewed and the existing body of knowledge.
- ▶ Indicate how your research revises, extends, or refines the understanding and knowledge of the topic.

As you can see, writing a literature review serves multiple purposes and may seem like a complex and challenging endeavor. Completing this work may, at times, intimidate beginners or even advanced students, as well as experienced practitioners and researchers. This book aims to alleviate the pressure involved in the process by guiding you with a step-by-step road map.

We wrote this book from a practical orientation that makes the development of a literature review accessible, efficient, and rewarding. We did this by focusing on each phase of the process and explaining it clearly, providing easy-to-follow suggestions, and illustrating the procedure of writing the review by using vignettes

and examples based on literature reviews written by our students, ourselves, and other researchers.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW DEVELOPMENT PROCESS |||

There are six major steps in developing and conducting a literature review, which are described in detail throughout the book. We realize that developing the literature review is not always a linear process. Rather, the process is continuous, dynamic, and interrelated, as different parts of the review are interconnected and inform each other. Nevertheless, for clarity and practical reasons, we developed an easy-to-follow sequential description of the process that progresses step by step from chapter to chapter. The following section highlights briefly what is involved in each of the six steps.

1. Choosing a literature review topic. The development of the literature review begins by selecting a topic of investigation that is meaningful for you and for your field. You will probably need to narrow down or broaden your topic by considering your purpose, your audience, and constraints such as time and access. The focus of your research should be stated as a well-defined question in order to create a researchable and manageable topic. This step is discussed in Chapter 3.

2. Locating literature review sources. After selecting a topic, you will locate sources that will provide knowledge and information about your topic. By identifying appropriate terms and keywords, developing search strategies, and searching records, you can search appropriate databases in your field of study. You may also benefit from tracing references in reviews, research papers, and books, or by asking colleagues or subject-matter experts for recommendations. This step also requires careful recording and organization of the identified sources and starting to create your own bibliography. This step is discussed in Chapter 4.

3. Analyzing and evaluating literature review sources. Once you locate sources through your searches, you will start by reading each source to determine its value for your research and whether it should be included in your review. Then you will document the themes and issues discussed in the literature that are relevant to your research question and interpret and summarize their contents. You will end by assessing the quality of the research presented in the study according to criteria for excellence that are indigenous to different research approaches. This evaluation process will allow you to become a critical reader and assess the credibility of the research sources and the extent to which the information offered is trustworthy, valid, and logical. This step is discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

4. Organizing and synthesizing the literature and building an argument. In this phase, you will assemble the analysis of the individual sources into a well-structured, persuasive, and holistic narrative. We start with a description of strategies that will enable you to structure the literature review around themes and patterns and recognize how they relate and build upon each other. We then discuss how to construct a logical argument that presents your point of view in a persuasive way. This is followed by a description of the process of synthesizing the literature and bringing it together into a coherent whole. This step is discussed in Chapters 7, 8, and 9.

5. Developing a writer voice and following writing conventions. At this point, you will probably be aware of your voice as a writer, and we will discuss ways of developing an active and authoritative writer voice as you carry on a dialogue with the authors discussed in your review. We also offer strategies that will allow you to overcome writing blocks. Ethics require you to properly reference and acknowledge all your sources and avoid intentional and unintentional plagiarism. Additionally, you should pay attention to your writing style and language usage, as well as appropriate citation and referencing style. This step is discussed in Chapters 10 and 11.

6. Writing, editing, and refining the literature review. Now you are ready write your literature review, which will demonstrate your ability to integrate theory and research and reveal a thorough understanding of current knowledge in your field and its implications for your research question. We summarize the different ways to place a literature review in a thesis or dissertation and offer different strategies that enhance the cohesiveness and flow of the writing. The completion of the literature review requires editing, revising, and refining your work, and we offer assessment matrices that will help you do that. This step is discussed in Chapter 12.

CREATING A PLAN OF ACTION

Reading through the six steps described above (which we call the CLAS-WE approach) could make you wonder how much time it will take you to complete the full process of writing a literature review. There is no exact answer to this question; it depends on the purpose of the review. Are you writing it for a class project, master's thesis, or dissertation proposal, or is it a part of a grant? The expectations are different for each type of review. The time frame may also be influenced by your professor's expectations, a grant schedule, or your professional plans. Additionally, the length of time required for completing the review depends on your own circumstances and the amount of time that you can devote to writing it.

Here is a story we tell our students when they want to know how much time it will take them to complete the first draft of the review:

A pedestrian was walking to a small village. As he passed an old man sitting under a tree beside the road, he asked, “Old man, can you please tell me how long it will take me to reach the village?” The old man did not respond to the question. Angrily the pedestrian continued with his walk. Suddenly, he heard from behind, “It will take you about 20 minutes.” Surprised, the pedestrian turned around and called out to the old man, “Why haven’t you responded before? Why did you wait with the answer until I got farther away?” “Well,” answered the old man patiently, “I had to see how fast you walk before I could estimate the time it will take you to reach your destination, didn’t I?”

Writing the review is an individual endeavor that requires commitment, dedication, and self-discipline. Your ability to devote several hours each week, away from your many other obligations, to focus on developing your literature review will dictate your productivity and the speed of your progress.

Constructing an action plan will enhance your ability to manage your time and finish the work within the designated or desired time frame. Creating a reasonable timetable will help you to carefully navigate the process and realistically and practically schedule each step required for completing the literature review. Life’s unexpected and unplanned eventualities may force you to modify your schedule; nevertheless, an overall project plan and timeline are essential for strengthening your self-discipline and the willpower required for successfully completing your work.

While there are many ways to develop a timetable, here are some suggestions that have worked for us and for our students. Start by going over the six steps for writing the literature review that we have outlined above. Be cognizant of your work style and your particular circumstances, and assess the time that will be required for completing each phase. Once you have determined the overall time needed for each step, subdivide that time according to the tasks involved in that phase. Remember to allow some leeway to accommodate and adapt to unforeseen delays that may occur when you implement the plan in practice.

Table 1.1 (p. 9) shows a section from a timeline plan that includes the major steps of writing the review, the tasks involved in each step, the time allocated for the tasks, the activities required for accomplishing the tasks, and a place for comments and reminders.

TABLE 1.1. Timeline Plan for Completing the Literature Review

| Steps | Tasks | Timeline | Activities | Comments |
|---------------------------------------|--|-----------|---|--|
| Step 1: Gain information on the topic | Initial exploration online; searching for information on a topic | Nov. 1–5 | Use online resources such as Google and Wikipedia | Look for additional appropriate search engines |
| Step 2: Library search | Start narrowing down the topic; find information about the topic | Nov. 6–13 | Meet with the librarian | Call and set an appointment |

A LITERATURE REVIEW WRITING GROUP

We have found that one of the ways to enhance a writer's self-discipline and the perseverance required for the writing process is working in writing groups. To form a working writing group, find one or several people who, like you, are undertaking the task of writing a literature review and with whom you can talk about your progress, uncertainties, frustrations, and moments of insight. We suggest that you collaborate with your group throughout the literature review writing process, scheduling regular meetings dedicated to brainstorming ideas, sharing drafts, and supporting each other. Providing each other with honest and critical feedback is important; personal criticism should be avoided since it may inhibit creativity and original insights, and, in general, negatively affect group dynamics. The group meetings may include the following:

1. Begin each group meeting with group members reporting their progress since their last meeting.
2. Share some of the choices you have made, the inner debates you have faced, and the decisions you have reached.
3. Read each other's work and provide feedback, ask questions, and provide suggestions for improvement.
4. Together consider the next task you are taking on: What are some of the options for this task? Present your rationale for what you are inclined to choose and invite your peers to respond to your ideas.

While not all group members are required to be at the same phase in their review writing, each should share the goal of completing the process and helping the others to achieve this goal.

With our recognition of the value and contribution of working in groups, we acknowledge that for some of our students working in a group is a luxury they cannot afford due to their tight schedule. If you are one of those students, you may treat the ideas for literature review group work that are spread throughout the book as a mere recommendation.

A DESCRIPTION OF THE BOOK

The craft of creating a literature review is not solely a technical formula. The methods, structure, and style of analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing prior research should reflect your own perspective in relation to knowledge and research. A literature review may emphasize a scientific and objective framework that is quantitative in its nature, or a subjective interpretation that is qualitative in its core. These perspectives may be grounded in different approaches to knowledge. For example, writers who promote the quantitative approach will adopt a scientific and technical framework and aim to demonstrate an objective and unbiased style of synthesizing studies. On the other hand, writers who lean toward a qualitative approach may perceive the reviewing process as a conversation with the theories and research they review and emphasize their own interpretive role. Based on the writer's perspective, there are different types of literature reviews, ranging from systematic to traditional–narrative, to hermeneutic–phenomenological.

As we describe the process of writing the literature review, we emphasize how the different approaches to knowledge and research are reflected in some of the writing phases and the procedures and strategies that distinguish each. At the same time, the processes of developing quantitative and qualitative reviews have many common features and similarities, and most of the skills, methods, and strategies discussed in the book are useful in developing both. In this book, therefore, we highlight the common procedures and methods while pointing out the distinctive terminology, ways of reasoning, and style of writing that are unique to different types of literature reviews.

Following is a brief summary of each of the book's chapters:

Chapter 1. What Is a Literature Review?

In the first chapter of the book, we explain what a literature review is, why one needs to review the literature, and what the purposes of the review are. We differentiate between stand-alone reviews and reviews that are part of the study. Then we provide an overview of the literature review process. Next, we suggest ways of constructing a plan of action that will enhance writers' ability to finish their work within their time frame. This process may include forming a literature review

group comprised of classmates or colleagues. The final section of Chapter 1 briefly describes the contents of each chapter in the book.

Chapter 2. Different Orientations to a Literature Review

In this chapter we explore the three major approaches to research and their conceptual assumptions. These approaches are quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. We then examine three orientations to writing the literature review: systematic, traditional–narrative, and hermeneutic–phenomenological. We end with a taxonomy of the literature review that will assist writers in arriving at their own style.

Chapter 3. Choosing a Review Topic and Formulating a Research Question

This chapter focuses on the first stage of the review and provides guidelines for selecting an area of interest and turning it into a topic of study. We discuss ways of choosing a topic and narrowing it down, considering the writer's audience and the significance of the topic to the field. We end by formulating and refining a research question that will guide the inquiry. We also point out the differences between formulating quantitative and qualitative questions and highlight how the different types of review—systematic, traditional–narrative, and hermeneutic–phenomenological—impact the way the questions are structured. We then describe how to write a research question and point out the characteristics of a well-written one.

Chapter 4. Locating and Organizing Research Sources

In this chapter we discuss what a literature search is and explain its purposes. We differentiate between primary, secondary, and tertiary sources and consider the kinds of references writers should look for. We outline the techniques and strategies for finding sources through traditional and digital libraries and other online databases. We end the chapter by suggesting how writers can track and record their searches and the sources they have obtained and offer ways for them to start creating their bibliography.

Chapter 5. Selecting, Analyzing, and Keeping Notes of Sources

This chapter explores the procedures involved in extraction, analysis, summarization, and interpretation of sources. Our discussion is divided into three parts. First, we focus on the process of selecting sources by scanning the chosen articles, determining the scope of the review, and using criteria for inclusion and exclusion of texts. Next, we discuss ways of identifying the sections within each source that are

relevant to the writer's topic and how to organize the chosen sections using a digital document folder. In the third part we discuss the process of note-taking where each piece of the identified information extractions is analyzed, summarized, and reflected upon. We also highlight options for digital note-taking strategies.

Chapter 6. Evaluating Research Articles

In this chapter we first highlight the role of a critical evaluation of the literature on the writer's topic. We then outline criteria that may help the writer to evaluate the quality of individual study. We highlight elements of research articles that are common to quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research. Then we focus on those criteria that are unique to the different types of research and offer suggestions for examining the validity of each. We conclude with suggestions for analyzing the unique ways of assessing hermeneutic–phenomenological research.

Chapter 7. Structuring and Organizing the Literature Review

In this chapter we describe four approaches for structuring and organizing the literature review: synthesis matrix, summary table, mapping, and outline. We define and highlight what distinguishes each, examine their advantages, describe how to construct them, and offer examples that illustrate how they might be used. Each strategy contributes in different ways to the writer's ability to identify themes and patterns in his or her sources, determine how they relate to each other, and discern the similarities and differences among them.

Chapter 8. Developing Arguments and Supporting Claims

This chapter contains two parts. The first focuses on building an argument of discovery. We focus first on constructing a simple argument that consists of three basic elements: claim, evidence, and warrant. We then describe four patterns of argument that differ from each other in their level of complexity: one-on-one reasoning, independent reasoning, dependent reasoning, and chain reasoning. The second part is focused on argument of advocacy. We discuss how to conclude the literature review by interpreting what was learned through the literature in the context of the writer's own intended study or future actions.

Chapter 9. Synthesizing and Interpreting the Literature

In this chapter we describe the process of synthesizing and interpreting the literature. We start by highlighting the strategies that are used in traditional–narrative review: grouping sources, comparing and contrasting sources, exploring conflicting or contradicting findings, and adopting critical dispositions. Reviewers of

all types of research commonly use these strategies. We then point out aspects that are unique to the synthesis of quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, and hermeneutic–phenomenological reviews.

Chapter 10. The Writer Voice and the Writing Process

This chapter focuses on the role writers may want to adopt as literature review authors and consider whether they want to use an active or passive voice. We offer different strategies for asserting presence in the narrative and describe methods for keeping their ideas separate from those of the authors they review. We then reflect on how writers may develop an authoritative voice while “dialoging” with the authors whose work they cite. We examine the preliminary writing of literature drafts, consider factors that may inhibit one’s writing, and end by offering strategies to overcome writing apprehension.

Chapter 11. Acknowledging Sources: Citations, Quotations, and Plagiarism

In this chapter, we begin by discussing issues related to three leading writing styles, with a focus on APA style. We explain and compare rules for citing and quoting sources according to the chosen writing style. We highlight rules and offer suggestions to ensure that writers avoid intentional and unintentional plagiarism. We end the chapter with a brief discussion of the basic rules for creating a reference list.

Chapter 12. Putting It All Together

In Chapter 12 we review the key elements of the dissertation and thesis proposal in which the review of the literature plays a major role. We demonstrate the interconnectedness of the literature review with other parts of the writer’s research. Next, we outline the different formats for organizing dissertations, theses, or grant proposals. We then provide different strategies that enhance the cohesiveness and flow of the writing. We end the chapter by offering criteria for assessing the literature review and provide assessment matrices that allow writers to evaluate their own work.

WHAT’S NEXT?

In this chapter, we defined what a literature review is, outlined its goals, and reviewed the six major steps involved in developing and conducting it. We noted the objective and scientific quantitative and subjective and interpretive qualitative approaches to the literature review and highlighted three types of review, ranging from systematic to traditional–narrative, to hermeneutic–phenomenological.

In the next chapter, we expand our discussion and describe each of these approaches as well as literature review types and consider the assumptions that undergird them. As you design your own work, understanding these different types of literature review and their methodological stances will help you make decisions that best fit your own perspective.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

1. A literature review is a critical, systematic examination of the scholarly literature written by scholars and researchers about one's own topic.
2. In reviewing the literature, the writer should (a) display an understanding of the current state of knowledge, (b) compare different research studies and theories, (c) reveal gaps in the current literature, and (d) indicate what needs to be explored further.
3. A literature review may be a stand-alone document or embedded in the proposed study. Both types are comprehensive and highlight the evolutionary and cumulative nature of knowledge creation.
4. Knowledge building depends on *generativity*—that is, situating research and building upon preexisting scholarly work and the literature review writers build on that knowledge and highlight it from their own perspectives.
5. A literature review is not (a) a presentation of one's own arguments and assumptions, (b) a position paper, (c) an annotated bibliography, or (d) a mirror of current literature in the field.
6. The purposes of the literature review are divided into three major categories: (a) setting the context for the study, (b) informing the research design and methodology, and (c) identifying areas for advancing the scholarship of the field.
7. There are six major steps (CLAS-WE) in developing and conducting a literature review: (a) choosing a literature review topic, (b) locating literature review sources, (c) analyzing and evaluating the literature review sources, (d) synthesizing the literature, (e) writing the literature review, and (f) editing and refining the literature review.
8. Writing a literature review does not follow a technical formula; rather, it reflects the writer's perspective in relation to existing knowledge and research.
9. A literature review may emphasize a scientific and objective framework that is quantitative in nature or a subjective interpretation that is qualitative at its core.
10. Based on the writer's perspective, there are different types of literature reviews, ranging from systematic to traditional–narrative, to hermeneutic–phenomenological.