

Literature Review: An Overview

Having happily found a suitable topic, the beginning researcher is usually “raring to go.” Too often the review of related literature is seen as a necessary evil to be completed as fast as possible so that that one can get on with the “real research.” This perspective is due to a lack of understanding of the purposes and importance of the review and to a feeling of uneasiness on the students who are not sure exactly how to go about reporting on the literature. Nonetheless, literature review of related literature is as important as any other component of the research process and can be conducted quite painlessly if approached in an orderly manner. Some researchers even find the process quite enjoyable!

Definition, Purpose, and Scope

The **Review of related literature** involves the systematic identification, location, and analysis of documents containing information related to the research problem. The term is also used to describe the written component of a research plan or report that discusses the reviewed documents. These documents can include articles, abstracts, reviews, monographs, dissertations, other research reports, and electronic media. The literature review has several important purposes that make **it** well worth the time and effort. The major purpose of reviewing the literature is to determine what has already been done that relates to your topic. This knowledge not only prevents you from unintentionally duplicating another person’s research, **it** also gives you the understanding and insight you need to place your topic within a logical frame. Put simply, the review tells you what has been done and what needs to be done. Previous studies can provide the rationale for your research hypothesis, and indications of what to be done can help you justify the significance of your study.

Another important purpose of reviewing the literature is to discover research strategies and specific data collection approaches that have or have not been productive in investigations of topics similar to yours. This information will help you avoid other researchers’ mistakes and profit from their experiences. It may suggest approaches and procedures that you previously had not considered. For example, suppose your topic involved the comparative effects of a brand-new experimental method versus the traditional method on the achievement of eighth-grade science students. The review of literature might reveal 10 related studies that found no differences in achievement. Several of the studies, however, might suggest that the brand-new method may be more effective for certain kinds of students than for others. Thus, you might reformulate your topic to involve the comparative effectiveness of the brand-new method versus the traditional method on the achievement of a subgroup of eighth-grade science students: those with low aptitude.

Being familiar with previous research also facilitates interpretation of your study results. The results can be discussed in terms of whether and how they agree with previous findings. If the results contradict previous findings, you can describe differences between your study and the others, providing a rationale for the discrepancy. If your results are consistent with other findings, your report should include suggestions for the next step; if they are not consistent, your report should include suggestions for studies that might resolve the conflict.

Beginning researchers often have difficulty determining how broad their literature review should be. They understand that all literature directly related to their topic should be reviewed; they just don’t know when to quit! They have trouble determining which articles are “related enough” to their topic to be included. Unfortunately, there is no formula that can be applied to solve the problem; you must base your decisions on your own judgment

and the advice of your teachers or advisors. The following general guidelines, however, can assist you:

- *Avoid the temptation to include everything you find in your literature review*, Bigger does not mean better. A smaller, well-organized review is definitely preferred to a review containing many studies that are more or less related to the problem.
- *When investigating a heavily researched area, review only those works that are directly related to your specific problem*. You'll find plenty of references and should not have to rely on less-related studies. For example, the role of feedback in learning has been extensively researched for both animals and human beings, for verbal learning and nonverbal learning, and for a variety of different learning tasks. If you were concerned with the relationship between frequency of feedback and chemistry achievement, you would probably not have to review feedback studies related to animal learning.
- *When investigating a new or little-researched problem area, review any study related in some meaningful way to your problem*. You'll need to gather enough information to develop a logical framework for the study and a sound rationale for the research hypothesis. For example, suppose you wanted to study the effects on GPA of an exam for non-English speaking students. The students must pass the exam to graduate. Your literature review would probably include any studies that involved English as a second language (ESL) classes and the effects of culture-specific grading practices, as well as studies that identified strategies to improve the learning of ESL students. In a few years from now, there will probably be enough research on the academic consequences of such an exam on non-English speaking students to permit a much more narrowly focused literature review.

A common misconception among beginning researchers is that the worth of a topic is a function of the amount of literature available on it. This is not the case. For many new and important areas of research, few studies have been published; the effects of high-stakes testing is one such area. The very lack of such research often increases the worth of its study. On the other hand, the fact that a thousand studies have already been done in a given problem area does not mean there is no further need for research in that area. Such an area will generally be very well developed, and subtopics that need additional research will be readily identifiable.

Qualitative Research and the Review of Related Literature

Unlike quantitative researchers, who spend a great deal of time examining the research on their topic at the outset of the study, some qualitative researchers will not delve deeply into their literature until their topic has emerged over time. There is disagreement among qualitative researchers about the role of the literature review in the research process. Some qualitative researchers have argued that reviewing the literature curtails inductive analysis—using induction to determine the direction of the research—and should be avoided at the early stages of the research process. Others suggest that the review of related literature is important early in the qualitative research process because it serves the following functions:

- The literature review demonstrates the underlying assumptions (propositions) behind the research questions that are central to the research proposal.
- The literature review provides a way for the novice researcher to convince the proposal reviewers that she is knowledgeable about the related research and the “intellectual traditions” that support the proposed study.

- The literature review provides the researcher with an opportunity to identify any gaps that may exist in the body of literature and to provide a rationale for how the proposed study may contribute to the existing body of knowledge.
- The literature review helps the researcher to refine the research questions and embed them in guiding hypotheses that provide possible directions the researcher may follow.

We recommend that qualitative researchers conduct a review of related literature but also recognize that the review serves a slightly different purpose than the one outlined for quantitative researchers.

Source: Gay, L. R., Mills, G. E., & Airasian, P.W. (2006). *Educational Research: Competencies for analysis and applications* (8th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall. Gay, pp29-44.