Review of Literature: An Overview

Purpose of a Review of Literature

Generally, the purpose of a review of literature is to critically analyze a segment of a published body of knowledge through summary, classification, comparison and evaluation of prior research studies, reviews of literature and theoretical articles. In short, the goal of a review of literature is to describe the “big picture” of a particular field of research in order to provide an intellectual context for the present study.

Specifically, a review of literature builds on previous research through identifying seminal works in the area under study, noting: gaps in the literature; opposing views, controversies or debates within the area; and methods that are relevant to the current project.

Steps in Developing a Review of Literature

1. Selecting a research topic
   Choose a topic of current interest. Secondly, narrow the topic and look for lines of research, i.e., bodies of related work.

2. Strategies for selecting relevant literature
   Include on-line data base searches, with particular attention to entry words to insure an efficient and relevant search. Attention should be paid to the quality of literature, i.e., juried journals and seminal researchers.

3. Writing the review
   a. In the introduction– define, identify and introduce the general topic, issue, or area of concern, thus providing an appropriate context for reviewing the relevant bodies of literature. Point out overall trends in what has been published about the topic. Describe conflicts in theory, methodology, evidence, and conclusions. Identify gaps in research and scholarship, or note a single problem or new perspective of immediate interest.

   b. In the body – summarize individual studies or articles with as much or as little detail as each warrants according to its comparative importance in the literature, remembering that space (length) denotes significance. Provide the reader with strong “umbrella” sentences at beginnings of paragraphs, “signposts” throughout, and brief “so what” summary sentences at intermediate points in the review to aid in understanding comparisons and analyses. Critically analyze, assess and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of studies reviewed.

   c. In the conclusion – summarize major contributions of significant studies and articles to the body of knowledge under review, maintaining the focus established in the introduction. Evaluate the current “state of the art” for the body of
knowledge reviewed, pointing out major methodological flaws or gaps in research, inconsistencies in theory and findings, and areas or issues pertinent to future study. Conclude by providing some insight into the relationship between the central topic of the literature review and a larger area of study such as a discipline, a scientific endeavor, or a profession. Also include implications for future research.

Questions to Ask Yourself

1. What is the specific thesis, problem, or research question that my literature review helps to define?

2. What type of literature review am I conducting? Am I looking at issues of theory, methodology, policy, quantitative research (e.g., on the effectiveness of new procedures), qualitative research?

3. What is the scope of my literature review? What types of publications am I using? (e.g., journals, books, government documents, popular media)?

4. How good was my information seeking? Has my search been wide enough to insure that I’ve found all the relevant material? Is the number of sources I’ve used appropriate for the length of my paper?

5. Have I critically analyzed the literature reviewed? Did I address concepts and questions, comparing items to each other in the ways they deal with them? Instead of simply listing and summarizing items, did I assess and discuss the strengths and weaknesses? Have I cited and discussed studies contrary to my perspective?

5. Will the reader find my literature review relevant, appropriate and useful?

Questions to Ask Yourself About Each Article or Book You Include

1. Has the author formulated a problem/issue?

2. Is the problem clearly defined and is its significance (scope, severity, relevance) clearly established?

3. Could the problem have been approached more effectively from another perspective?

4. What is the author’s research orientation (e.g., interpretive, critical science, combination)?
5. What is the author’s theoretical framework (e.g. psychological, developmental, feminist)?

6. What is the relationship between the theoretical and research perspectives?

7. Has the author evaluated the literature relevant to the problem/issues? Has the author included literature that takes positions she or he does not agree with?

8. In a research study, how good are the basic components of the study design (e.g., population, intervention, outcome)? How accurate and valid are the measurements? How well have the authors addressed potential threats to the internal and external validity of their work? Is the analysis of the data accurate and relevant to the research question? Are the conclusions validly based upon the data and analysis?

9. In material for a popular readership, does the author use appeals to emotion, one-sided examples, or rhetorically charged language and tone? Is there an objective basis to the reasoning, or is the author merely “proving” what he or she already believes?

10. How does the author structure the argument? Can you decipher the flow of the argument to see whether or where it breaks down logically (e.g., in establishing cause-effect relationships)?

11. In what ways does the article or book contribute to the understanding of the problem under study, and in what ways is it useful for practice? What are the strengths and limitations?

12. How does the article or book relate to the specific thesis or question I am developing?

References

http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/litrev.html


http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/ReviewofLiterature.html

http://www.erin.utoronto.ca/~w3lib/pub/evaluate/webevalu.htm