

“ASK THE PROFESSOR” about ... GOOD LITERATURE REVIEWS

Pātai: (Question)

***Why do we HAVE to do a literature review? It sounds boring to me.
And what is a literature review anyway?***

Professor Alison Jones replies:

Literature reviews are always needed in academic writing – whether a thesis or an article or book. Most students think we must review the existing literature because “we need to get support for our ideas from the already-legitimated ideas of others”. This is NOT the best reason for a literature review.

A literature review **maps the territory of your question**. It does *not*, if it is useful, map the entire country of your question, and the entire history of your question. If the literature review casts itself too far and wide, the reader starts to wonder when you are going to get to *your* question and *your* point. In fact, YOUR question should both arise out of, and shape, YOUR literature review.

Remember, academic writing is not merely a set of ideas you have ‘made up’ from your own thinking alone (your diary may be like this, or the novel you are writing). As an academic, you have read a lot – or you should have – about your topic area, and you want to *enter the written conversation* with others who have already thought about your area of interest. *You want to add your arguments and evidence and your question to the debates*. You do this initially via the literature review. Those researchers and writers you refer to in your literature review are those you invite into the conversation. You must invite in your enemies as well as your friends. Only this way will you have a robust conversation!

At the end of the literature review, your reader should

- be excited about (and understand) your question;
- understand why you are writing about it;
- know what others have and haven’t said about it; and
- what you are going to say about it.

Give me twenty points about a good literature review ...

1. *A literature review is always necessary for any research*. It gives a context within which to understand the research. It provides a sense of the terrain on which the research is carried out. It provides a rationale for the research, and positions the researcher’s question in relation to others in the field.
2. Because it is *ground-setting*, the bulk of the literature review tends to come at the *beginning* of the research account, but the literature introduced at the beginning should also be in evidence throughout.

3. *The review needs to provide a clear and accurate account of what other researchers and writers have argued about your topic.* It asks: Who has addressed this question before and what have they said about it? What do we already 'know'? Which theoretical ideas and which concepts have been used in talk about this issue?
4. *If there is very little literature on your topic,* suggest why this might be the case. Which literature will you refer to in order to develop a good argument/approach to your question? If no-one is working in your field, why is it an important area of study? Maybe someone has used a theoretical or conceptual framework which you have found interesting in relation to another issue. In other words, other literature may not share surface features, but may share some deep structural features which are useful to you.
5. *The literature review is the place where we find out what research question you will address and why* that question is important. 'Read' the literature in terms of your question. Your literature review is shaped by *your* question. No-one else's literature review will be like yours, as a result.
6. In other words, the literature review should *not be descriptive* (it should not merely describe what everyone else has said on your topic), but should *actively address your problem* and lead you to your research question
7. *A literature review puts your work 'on the map' in your field of research.* You need to indicate how you position yourself in relation to the literature. Do you wish to contribute to it by replicating already existing studies? Will you identify gaps and contradictions in the literature? Are you offering a critique of the way the literature has tended to conceptualise the field or question?
8. *Literature reviews have a narrative structure;* they should 'tell a story'. They should take a position and argue it in relation to the literature at hand. This argument should be the one which is then developed and/or critiqued in the research project as a whole.
9. *Your work is located in a history of ideas.* The literature review provides a chance to indicate both where your ideas fit historically and how ideas about a topic or question have changed over time. Literature published on one particular topic in the 1950s, or the 1970s, or the 1990s, for instance, will give very different accounts of the same thing. How are these shifts significant? How do they limit/shape our thinking about the question? But be careful – do not get too preoccupied with history of your question unless your question *demand*s this.
10. *What is 'relevant' literature?* A literature review involves selecting books, chapters, documents and articles (even fiction texts) which are 'relevant' to your research topic – *what you define as (and argue is) 'relevant'* will determine the shape of your research. You will usually limit your approach to *one* set of related key words, and argue for the usefulness of those words and their meanings to your problem.
11. *Too much literature, too little time.* Part of the skill and the hard work in writing research is making good choices about which literature to read. The more clearly defined your topic or question, the narrower your focus, the more 'efficient' you can be (though sometimes this efficiency can be at the expense of serendipity and creativity). You will probably read widely to start with, but narrow down your reading fairly quickly.

12. *A literature review does not need to be labelled 'literature review'* in the research write-up. Your review may do the above work, but may do so in the form of a discussion of a particular question or issue.
13. *You will probably re-work your literature review several times* as you complete your research writing. This does not mean you are simply wasting time. Each version will serve a different purpose, and will take a different shape as the research takes shape. You will only have a problem if you try and cut and paste whole sections of the old version into the revised project which has by now been rethought.
14. *In terms of process, it is rare to follow the linear order of:* read the literature, write the literature review, then do the research. Although much reading must be done prior to beginning research and in the development of a research question, writing and reading happen together. Usually important literature is discovered all the way through the research process, and is integrated into the review, and continues to shape the research as it develops.
15. There must come a point where *reading ceases*. There is always something else to be read, and relevant, fabulous new books and articles appear every day - but at some point you must say clearly: 'That's it! This is my 'literature', and I will now stop reading for this project.' All you need to be is up-to-date to a particular date!
16. *Do not be tempted to over-quote*. It is better to paraphrase than include large chunks of quotation. Save the quotes for essential points which require the original.
17. *The literature review does not contain all the literature you have read on the topic*. Select for the review only that literature which is directly relevant, and ditch the rest.
18. It is never a good idea to introduce new literature in the *conclusion* section of any research account or literature review.
19. *The literature review should be seductive*. It should invite the reader to see the topic and research area as fascinating, timely and worthwhile. The most seductive reviews are those which take a dispassionate tone and, through indicating the implications of the assumptions of the arguments in the literature, inexorably take the reader to a convincing conclusion.
20. These two sites are particularly useful and easy to use for the APA (American Psychological Association) *referencing style*. This is a very common style.
http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/r_apa.html
http://www.vanguard.edu/faculty/ddegelman/index.cfm?doc_id=796

Another site worth looking at for its help with referencing is
<http://www.cite.auckland.ac.nz/index.php>

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