



## Conducting A Literature Review

### **WHAT IS A LITERATURE REVIEW?**

It is.... a systematic and critical analysis of the literature on a specific topic. It describes trends, quality, relationships, inconsistencies and gaps in the research; and it details how the works enhance your understanding of the topic at large.

It is NOT.... simply an annotated bibliography that summarizes and/or assesses each article.

There is not one, correct way to approach and write a literature review. It can be a stand-alone paper or part of a thesis/dissertation. Format and requirements can vary between disciplines, purpose and intended audience.

### **WHY WRITE A LITERATURE REVIEW?**

- Provides a depth of knowledge of the field of inquiry: facts, lingo, theories, important scholars, trends, etc.
- Gain understanding of methodologies common to the field and appropriateness of various methods
- Helps us understand what is known and what is unknown, what works and what doesn't work
- Helps to determine scope of your question. Usually it will help to narrow or focus a problem/issue, but it may also help you determine where you need to step back and look at a bigger problem/question/theories/etc.
- Reinforces that your proposed question is sound and pertinent
- Generates hypotheses or questions for further studies

### **CONDUCTING LITERATURE REVIEWS:**

#### **1. Choose a topic and defining a question**

- Initially, keep your topic fluid, and do preliminary searching so you can adjust your question/scope as necessary
- Use reference tools like *Gale Virtual Reference Library* ([www.lib.utexas.edu/indexes](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/indexes) > G) to make sure you've grasped theories and "big pictures"
- Once you have a sense of the literature landscape, try to focus on an answerable question, rather than covering a broad topic.
- Determine inclusion criteria and parameters and depth of coverage: Highlights vs. comprehensive review, current research vs. seminal works, limit to specific populations, applications, methodologies, etc.

#### **2. Identify the Literature**

- Determine which search tools you will use. Don't use just one! You'll find a list of library databases under the "Find Articles Using Databases" link on the library home page.
- For each search tool, determine the search phrases and limits that will provide the best results. Save or document this search! The best search for one database isn't likely to be the best search in another database.
- Through this process, adjust your topic and/or keyword scope accordingly.
- Know that you may need to conduct multiple searches in each database to catch all of the literature on your topic. Consider searching for distinct sets of literature that will each enlighten your knowledge of a very specific topic.
- Try to identify the "seminal works" and important authors for your topics.
- Save your searches and /or keep a list of subject headings or keywords related to your topic. You may rely on these in further searching and in developing conceptual outline for your review.

#### **3. Analyze the Literature**

- Read the articles you've selected.
- Take notes! Especially focus on the strengths and weakness, as you are aiming to provide a critical analysis, rather than a summary of the literature.
- If your notes use the exact phrasing as the article, note it as such to avoid plagiarism.
- Consider categorizing the articles, or parts of articles, as to which aspects of your topic they address.
- Note any lingo, definitions or theories you want to use, remember or investigate further.
- Identify commonalities, relationships and trends in the literature. This may help determine themes or categories for your review. Also note any inconsistencies, so you can later determine if there is cause for specifically addressing them in your review.
- Note any gaps in the literature, and consider why this may be occurring.

#### 4. Synthesize the Literature

- This is the step where you conceptually bring everything together into a whole, or complete package where you determine what it all means... A new theory or interpretation? A new methodological approach? Recommendation for further research?
- Use your notes to determine major categories or sections of your review.
- Create an outline, and order your notes and articles to follow the flow of your outline.
- Within each category of the review, plan to address trends, gaps, conflicts, methodologies, relevant theories, etc.

#### 5. Write the Review

- Identify the problem and why it is significant.
- Make note of any literature and/or search parameters.
- If there are other reviews on this topic, note them and include a citation for the reader.
- Distinguish empirical research from other types of information.
- Provide as much detail as each study merits. They do not have to be presented equally.
- Note when a particular work is “seminal” or especially important and why.
- Note when a study is a replication of another cited work.
- Minimize the use of lengthy quotes. Again, this is your critique of the literature, not a summary of the literature!
- Summarize periodically and again at the end, finally describing the “state of the research” on your topic and directions for future research.
- Include all mentioned literature in a works cited list.

#### FINDING LITERATURE REVIEWS:

Start at the Library Databases: <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/indexes>

- - **Annual Reviews Online** - Lengthy lit reviews, written by experts on the topic. Only certain topics are covered.
- - **Dissertation Abstracts** – Full text dissertations. Each contains a lit review!
- - **PsycINFO & Medline**: Let you limit your results to literature reviews. Look for the option to limit by methodology.
- - **Other databases**: Add this line to your search: *“literature review” OR “review of the literature”*

#### LITERATURE REVIEW GUIDES:

(to locate print and e-books, search for the title in the [Library Catalog](#). Leave out special characters like the colon)

##### eBooks:

- Academic Writing: A Handbook for International Students
- Conducting Research Literature Reviews: From Paper to the Internet
- The Literature Review: A Step-by-Step guide for students
- Succeeding with your Literature Review: A Handbook for Student
- Synthesizing Research: A Guide for Literature Reviews
- When to Use What Research Design

##### Print Books:

- An Education Research Primer: How to Understand, Evaluate, and Use it
- Conducting Research Literature Reviews: From Paper to the Internet: Preparing Literature Reviews
- Writing Literature Reviews: A Guide for Students of the Social and Behavioral Sciences
- Writing Empirical Research Reports

##### Web Sites:

- Literature Reviews (University of North Carolina, Writing Center):
  - o [http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/literature\\_review.html](http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/literature_review.html)
- Writing Literature Reviews (Claremont Graduate University, Writing Center):
  - o <http://www.cgu.edu/pages/899.asp>
- Writing a Psychology Literature Review (University of Washington, Psychology Writing Center):
  - o <http://depts.washington.edu/psywc/handouts/pdf/litrev.pdf>



## Using UT Library Databases to Find Articles & Manage Citations

### CHOOSING YOUR DATABASES

1. Start at: [www.lib.utexas.edu/indexes](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/indexes)
2. From here, you may access the databases in a variety of ways...
  - Browse alphabetically for a specific database
  - Choose “Databases by Subject” to see databases recommended by areas of study
  - Choose “Databases by Type” to see databases with specific types of material (ebooks, statistics, images, etc)
3. To determine which databases are best for your topic...
  - Look at the “about” pages for each database to determine what is included
  - Look at the recommended “Top Databases” list for each subject
  - Find the subject librarian/s for areas related to your research and ask for recommendations

### DATABASE SEARCH TIPS

- Don't search with your topic as a phrase! (i.e.: *faculty stress related to tenure processes*)
- Use ANDs to separate important concepts – often this is done by typing each concept into a unique search bar.
- Use ORs to connect synonyms within a search bar. Think of all the terms that might fall under the umbrella of this concept (*stress OR coping OR anxiety*).
- When you find a good article, look at the subject headings and adjust your keywords accordingly.

Example search:

Searching: **PsycINFO** | [Choose Databases »](#)


☐ Suggest Subject Terms

<input type="text" value="coping OR stress OR anxiety"/>	in	<input type="text" value="Select a Field (optional)"/>	<input type="button" value="Search"/> <input type="button" value="Clear"/>
<input type="button" value="AND"/>	<input type="text" value="faculty OR professors"/>	<input type="text" value="Select a Field (optional)"/>	
<input type="button" value="AND"/>	<input type="text" value="tenure"/>	<input type="text" value="Select a Field (optional)"/>	

[Add Row](#)

### FINDING THE TEXT

If an article of interest is not full text in the database...

1. Follow  to see if it's online in another place. Usually you will be taken to a publisher pages that provides the abstract. Look around for a way to open a PDF or HTML copy.
2. If you get a message saying “no online full text is available” for an article you need, click on the Library Catalog link to see if we have a paper copy in our collection.
3. If we do not have an online or paper copy, click the link called “Interlibrary Loan” to request a borrowed copy. These borrowed copies usually arrive in PDF format within 2-5 days. This service is free to UT students, faculty and staff.

## **MORE ON FINDING ARTICLES**

Tutorial: <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/students/find/findarticles.html>

Find Articles class: <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/services/instruction/classes/recordings.html> (recording of past class)

## **GOOGLE SCHOLAR SEARCH TIPS**

- When off campus, go to Google Scholar through the Libraries databases list or LIBsearch box on the home page. This way Google will know that you have access to journals subscribed to by UT Libraries
- The link called "Get This Article" works like the orange "Find it @ UT" button in the databases
- Google Scholar searches within the full text of most articles, so very general searches will get WAY to many results.
- Keep specific phrases together with quotations: "high stakes testing"

## **MANAGING RESULTS**

Get to know your tools! Most databases have an option to set up an account. Once you don that, in most cases you can...

- Save results/citations indefinitely
- Save searches
- Set up alerts so you'll be informed when the database adds new articles that match your searches
- Export citations to citation management tools.

## **CITATION MANAGEMENT OPTIONS:**

- Create an account with the databases you most often use. Most will allow you to save searches & citations.
- **EndNote Web:** (free): <https://www.myendnoteweb.com>
- **EndNote:** (purchase at the Campus Computer Store): <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/services/instruction/endnote.html>
- **Zotero:** <http://www.zotero.org/>
- **Citation Management Tool Comparisons:** <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/citations>

## **ASKING FOR HELP**

Contact a subject librarian: <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/subject/index.php>

Stop by or call a reference desk: <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/services/reference/refdir.html>

Chat/IM with us: <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/services/reference/chat/>