



# Research Project: literature review

## What is a literature review?

**Literature** = scholarly publications which have been written on a particular topic, such as journal articles, research reports, government reports and text books.

**The review** = the careful selection of literature relevant to your topic and the presentation, interpretation, classification and evaluation of this literature.

## Why do a literature review?

Your literature review becomes an essential link in your research project:

- The literature review provides the reader with all the important background information needed to understand your project.
- It places your project as one link in a chain of research that is developing knowledge in your field.
  - To understand where you are going, it is important to understand what came before you.
- It demonstrates to the reader that you are aware of up-to-date and important knowledge on your topic.
- It may also be used to justify or provide a rationale for your research question, your research framework or your methodology.

## A literature review is NOT ...

### An annotated bibliography

- In an annotated bibliography the writer presents a summary and critical evaluation of each article or scholarly resource, one by one.
- There is little or no connection made between the various articles or resources.

### An essay

- Essays and literature reviews have very different purposes and require different approaches.
- In an essay a student is given a topic to discuss or a question to answer and the writing is organised around responding to that topic or question.
- The essay progresses in a linear way, where the student presents his/her first point, followed by an explanation which is supported by the literature.
- The student then moves on to the second point and so on.
- So in an essay the literature has a supporting role, whereas in a literature review it is the literature itself which is the subject of discussion.

## In the literature you WILL NOT ...

- answer a question



### In the literature you **WILL** ...

- identify a gap in existing knowledge, that is, you will identify what we still need to know about this topic or issue
- **POSE** a question related to this gap. This will be your research question.
- compare and contrast different authors' views on an issue
- note areas in which authors are in disagreement
- highlight gaps
- or identify any particular shortcomings of past research

In this way your literature review becomes a critical discussion of the knowledge or ideas related to your research topic

### Structure of the literature review

The body of your literature review will be organised in way that best suits your topic

- **Historically/chronologically** - if you are looking at the evolution of a concept or practice overtime or evaluating whether a concept from 20 years ago holds up today, then a historical or chronological organization might be appropriate.
- **Research questions** - some writers organise their literature review around the research questions.
- **Themes** - a very common way to organise the literature is according to key themes which emerge from the literature in relation to your topic

### Organising your literature

You must demonstrate that you went about your literature review in a systematic and rigorous way. You can include diagrams or tables to show how you have organised your literature. A literature review is usually organised as follows:

#### A brief introduction:

- The length will depend on the word requirement for your research project report or paper. It could be just a couple of sentences or it could be several paragraphs.
- Inform the reader of the purpose or focus of the section and sign post to the reader what is coming up in this section.
- You may want to also inform the reader of how you went about the process of conducting the literature review so that the reader can be assured of the rigor of your process.

#### The body sections:

- Lead the reader through your various ideas and understandings.
- Have clear sections and subsections to your literature review.
- Ensure that each paragraph has one clear idea.
- Use sign posting, transitioning and linking language to connect ideas and to move from one paragraph to the next.

#### Conclusion:

- Summarise the main focus of the literature review.
- Highlight the gap in the literature.
- Make a connection between your literature review and your research questions.