

What's a Literature Review?

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Sometimes a researcher makes the mistake of rushing into planning and carrying out the study before making a thorough survey of the literature. You, the researcher, must relate your topic to existing knowledge in your area of interest. It is important for you as a person engaged in research to be able to locate, organize, and use the literature in your field.

The search for related literature should be completed before actually proceeding with the study. This stage, although it often appears tedious, serves several important functions:

1. *A good familiarity with related research enables you, the investigator, to define the limits of current research and what new research is needed in the field. A researcher might say, "Smith, Jones, and Johnson discovered this much about the topic, and later, Brown and Green added to that knowledge in this way. Now I plan to go beyond their work to find out Z in this way."*
2. *An understanding of theory in the field enables you to place the question in perspective. You should determine whether your efforts would be likely to add to knowledge in a meaningful way. In general, studies that can confirm or deny theory-based hypotheses are more useful than studies that proceed independently of theory because the latter tend to produce only isolated bits of information.*
3. *By studying related research, you learn which procedures and instruments have proven useful and which seem less promising and more likely to waste valuable time and effort. As you proceed through the related literature and develop greater understanding, you may soon find yourself seeing ways in which the studies could have been improved. Of course, hindsight is always more accurate than foresight, so it is probably inevitable that early studies in a field often seem simplistic or ineffective. This observation illustrates a major reason for emphasizing the related-literature part of research studies: both the successes and the failures of past work provide insight for designing your own study. If you build carefully on past investigations, you can expect to increase your knowledge of your field.*

(Over)

4. *A thorough search of related research avoids unintentional replication of previous studies.* Frequently a researcher develops a worthwhile idea only to discover that a very similar study already exists. If such a thing happens to you, you must decide whether deliberately to replicate the previous work or to change plans and investigate a different aspect of the problem.
5. *A careful study of related literature puts you in a better position to interpret the significance of your own results.* Becoming familiar with theory in the field and with previous research prepares you to fit your findings into the body of knowledge in the field.

Common Errors in Reviewing the Literature

1. Carrying out a hurried review of the literature in order to get started on the research project. This usually results in overlooking previous studies containing ideas that could improve the project.
2. Relying too heavily upon secondary sources.
3. Over-relying on Internet sources or accepting them uncritically.
4. Concentrating on the findings when reading research articles, and overlooking valuable information about methods, measures, and so forth.
5. Overlooking sources other than journals, such as newspapers and popular magazines; be sure, however, not to overrely on non-professional materials.
6. Failing to define satisfactorily the topic limits of the review of the literature. Searching too broad an area often leads to your becoming discouraged or covering the material only superficially. Searching too narrow an area can cause you to overlook many articles that are peripheral to the research topic but contain information that would help design a better study.
7. Copying bibliographic data incorrectly and then being unable later to locate the reference you need.
8. Copying far too much material onto note cards. This often makes it look as if you do not have a clear understanding of the project and cannot separate important from unimportant information.

Extra:

Don't make the mistake of the inexperienced graduate student who asked, "Why do I have to have a literature review? I'm not an English major."