

Organize Related Literature

Planning Research Papers 6

Once you are satisfied that you have carried out a reasonably comprehensive study of the literature in the field, you need to organize it. A useful approach is to arrange the studies by topic or sub-topic and determine how each of these relates to your study.

1. *Present the literature so as to justify carrying out the study by showing what is known and what remains to be investigated about the topic.* The hypotheses provide a framework for organizing the related literature. The researcher needs to state clearly what is known and show the readers what still needs to be investigated. If the study has several facets or is investigating more than a single hypothesis, that clarification and explanation should be done separately for each facet of the study.
2. *Avoid the temptation to present the literature as a series of separate, unrelated summaries.* Instead, present the literature systematically by, for example, grouping studies with similar topics, approaches, or findings.
3. *Don't include every study you find in a search of literature.* It is almost inevitable that a number of the reports that you have carefully studied and included in notes will later prove to be only loosely related to the topic. Mere quantity will not impress your readers. Relevance and organization of the material are more important.

Unless you approach the task of assembling the related literature in a systematic manner from the beginning, the work can become very disorganized. On the other side of this sheet are some suggestions that may help you organize your notes.

1. *Begin with the most recent studies in your field and then work backward through earlier volumes.* One obvious advantage of this approach is that you start with studies that already contain the thoughts and findings of previous research. Earlier misunderstandings have already been pointed out and you avoid repeating others' mistakes. Another advantage is that these studies will include references to earlier works and, therefore, direct you to sources you might not otherwise have thought of. Obviously, you must set limits to the process of gathering related research. On one hand, laying a meaningful groundwork for a study entails including all the important works in the field. On the other hand, devoting excessive time to this attempt is a waste of your time. Make sure that the related literature helps set up your own work but does not dominate it.
2. *Read the abstract or summary section of a report first to determine whether it is relevant to your question.* This can save a lot of time that might be wasted reading unhelpful articles.
3. *Before taking notes, skim the report quickly to find those sections that are related to your question.* This is another way to save reading time.
4. *Make notes directly on file cards; they are easier to sort and organize than sheets of paper, backs of envelopes, and so on.* Many prefer 4-by-6-inch file cards, which provide a reasonable space for notes but are small enough to fit into a pocket or purse. Alternatively, you might prefer to transfer your notes every day or two into a file, keeping the notes and the reference information together. As you add more notes to the file, you will often notice similarities and differences between different sets of notes so that you can see connections or "holes" in your literature search. It is easy then to bunch similar items and write down quick observations that reveal places where notes and ideas need more clarification or investigation. When it comes to actually writing the paper, most of your notes will already be organized.
5. *For each work, write out the complete bibliographic reference.* If you know which citation style you have to use, you can save time by using that reference form while notetaking. Add the library call number also, to make it easier to find the work again if you have to.
6. *To make sorting and organizing easier, do not put more than one reference on each card.* It is not possible to arrange your references alphabetically or in any other way unless you record them singly.
7. *Be sure to indicate which parts of the notes are direct quotations from the author and which are your own paraphrases.* If you fail to make this clear to yourself, you could inadvertently commit plagiarism.