Literature Review and Citation/Referencing in Scientific & Technical Writing

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Outline

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Why write a literature review?

New discoveries don’t materialise out of nowhere; they build upon the findings of previous experiments and investigations. A literature review shows how the investigation you are conducting fits with what has gone before and puts it into context.

A literature review demonstrates to your reader that you are able to:

1. Understand and critically analyse the background research.
2. Select and source the information that is necessary to develop a context for your research.

It also:

1. Shows how your investigation relates to previous research.
2. Reveals the contribution that your investigation makes to this field (fills a gap, or builds on existing research, for instance).
3. Provides evidence that may help explain your findings later.

(Source and further reading: Website: University of Reading)
What is a Literature review?

Perspective 1 (University of Toronto):

- A literature review is an account of what has been published on a topic by accredited scholars and researchers.
- In writing the literature review, your purpose is to convey to your reader what knowledge and ideas have been established on a topic, and what their strengths and weaknesses are.
- As a piece of writing, the literature review must be defined by a guiding concept (e.g., your research objective, the problem or issue you are discussing, or your argumentative thesis). It is not just a descriptive list of the material available, or a set of summaries.

Perspective 2 (University of Reading):

- A literature review is a select analysis of existing research which is relevant to your topic, showing how it relates to your investigation. It explains and justifies how your investigation may help answer some of the questions or gaps in this area of research.
- A literature review is not a straightforward summary of everything you have read on the topic and it is not a chronological description of what was discovered in your field.
How to get started?

Logical Steps:

1. Start by identifying what you will need to know to inform your research:
2. What research has already been done on this topic?
3. What are the sub-areas of the topic you need to explore?
4. What other research (perhaps not directly on the topic) might be relevant to your investigation?
5. How do these sub-topics and other research overlap with your investigation?

NB. Note down all your initial thoughts on the topic. You can use a spidergram or list to help you identify the areas you want to investigate further. It is important to do this before you start reading so that you don't waste time on unfocussed and irrelevant reading.

(Source and further reading: Website: University of Reading.)
Searching sources?

**Note:** It’s easy to think that the best way to search for texts is to use the Internet — to ‘Google it’. There are useful online tools that you may use, like Google Scholar.

- However, for most literature reviews you will need to focus on academically authoritative texts like academic books, journals, research reports, government publications.

- Searching Google will give you thousands of hits, few of them authoritative, and you will waste time sorting through them.

- A better idea is to use databases. These are available through the Library in paper and electronic (usually online) forms.

For example:

**Top tip:** See the Library’s guides to searching databases.

(Source and further reading: Website: University of Reading.)
Skills acquired from Literature Review

Besides enlarging your knowledge about the topic, writing a literature review lets you gain and demonstrate skills in two areas:

1. **Information seeking**: the ability to scan the literature efficiently, using manual or computerized methods, to identify a set of useful articles and books.

2. **Critical appraisal**: the ability to apply principles of analysis to identify unbiased and valid studies.

(Source and further reading: Website: University of Toronto.)
What is expected of a Literature Review?

A literature review must do these things:

1. be organized around and related directly to the thesis or research question you are developing.
2. synthesize results into a summary of what is and is not known.
3. identify areas of controversy (disagreement) in the literature.
4. formulate questions that need further research.

(Source and further reading: Website: University of Toronto.)
Important: Academic writing requires that you acknowledge other writers' words and thoughts by citing and referencing your sources of information.

Citing is the practice of quoting from, or referring to, other writers' works and ideas in the text of your work.

Referencing is the listing of the full details of the publications that you have cited so that the reader can find the original sources. Citing and referencing have long been regarded as hallmarks of good academic writing.

(Source and further reading: Websites: University of Cape Town, University of Stellenbosch.)
Good reasons for citation

- Writing is "intellectual property" and you have to give credit to persons who first expressed an idea. The practice of citing and referencing the work of others is the best way of protecting yourself from being accused of, or committing plagiarism.

- Relevant citations show the reader that you have read the literature in a field, have an understanding of it, and are familiar with the important researchers in the particular field of study. This gives authority to your statements by showing that your arguments are supported by other writers. If, on the other hand, you leave some out, or rely on the writings of lesser or discredited authors, this may detract from your own work.

- Citations show how up-to-date your reading has been. In certain subject fields it is very important to be aware of the most recent developments. References enable the reader to check the accuracy of a quotation, or find the source and the context of a quotation or idea.

(Source and further reading: Website: University of Cape Town.)
Plagiarism in academic writing

- Students are often unsure of exactly what plagiarism is and how it affects them. These days, because of the ease of cutting and pasting from the Web, student plagiarism has become an issue of great concern at academic institutions.

- Plagiarism is the misappropriation of others’ words (incl. copying verbatim), thoughts and ideas by presenting them as your own, and is treated very seriously in the academic world. **Under no circumstances is it acceptable to present the work of others as your own.** Neither ignorance nor carelessness will be accepted as an excuse. There are sophisticated websites and techniques aimed at tracking down all kinds of plagiarism.

- Credible Universities have invested in software known as **Turnitin**, which is designed to detect plagiarism; you may therefore be required to submit your work electronically, so that it may be tested. **At the very least, students found guilty of plagiarism could be failed, or at worst, face expulsion from their academic institution.**

(Source and further reading: Websites: University of Cape Town, University of Stellenbosch.)
Citation styles

There are many different referencing styles and conventions used to encourage a clear and consistent pattern of citation. Scientific publications often use the citation or style guide published by societies and institutions in their own discipline.

One of the best-known, but also one of the simplest styles, is the “author-date” style of citing and referencing (often referred to as the “Harvard style”). In all cases, consistency is the most important consideration.

For publications, each journal publishes thorough and comprehensive instructions to authors on its website.

(Source and further reading: Websites: University of Cape Town, University of Stellenbosch.)
List of References at the end of the Text

The reference indicator (citation) does not give enough information for the reader to find the work, the source, in which the idea or quotation can be found.

**Full bibliographic details** of all the sources mentioned in your work have to be listed at the end of the text.

- This list may be called "References", "Reference list" or "Works cited." The term "Bibliography" is used when you include all works consulted, even those not actually quoted.

**How references are arranged in the reference list?**

The list of references mentioned in your work is **arranged alphabetically by the surname of the author**. Alphabetical order makes it easy to locate the details of all the sources cited within the text. It is essential that the reference indicator corresponds with the first word of the reference in the reference list.

(Source and further reading: University of Cape Town.)
THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!!

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