

Introduction

The Literature Review Process

Getting Started

Chi ha fretta vada piano.
In order to go fast, you must go slow.

KEY VOCABULARY

- **Basic Literature Review**—A written document that develops a case to establish a thesis. This review synthesizes current knowledge pertaining to the research question.
- **Advanced Literature Review**—A review that uses the work of the basic review to formulate and argue a question for original research.
- **Topic**—A research area refined by interest, an academic discipline, and an understanding of relevant key works and core concepts.
- **Thesis Statement**—A conclusion based on a case developed using existing knowledge, sound evidence, and reasoned argument.

So you need to produce a literature review. Perhaps this is a class assignment, a thesis for a master's degree, or the foundation for your doctoral dissertation. Whether you are approaching this task as a first-time or experienced researcher, you are doing it for the same reason, to increase your skills and knowledge. You want to learn, and you also want the satisfaction of completing a successful project. To succeed, you will want to avoid the problem a colleague of

ours mentioned: “Some do not have the patience and foresight to do it right the first time, but have infinite patience and capacity to do it over, and over, and over again.”

The good news is that you do not need to reinvent the literature review process. You do not have to use trial and error. There are known procedures and skills you can use to make your task easier and more efficient. This book provides a road map to produce a literature review that will contribute to your field. If you use this text conscientiously, it will help you arrive successfully at your destination. Each chapter offers tips and tools from many sources, including from the authors’ experience. Using the six-step process offered here should enable you to plan your literature review journey well, without wasting time and effort.

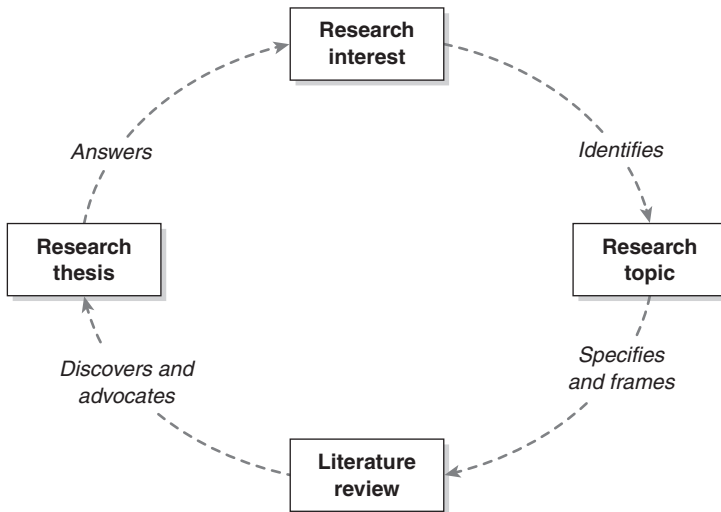
This introductory chapter begins with the selection of your destination—that is, with the selection of your literature review’s purpose. As you begin, ask yourself, am I trying to present a thesis that defines the current state of knowledge about a topic, or am I arguing a thesis that defines a research problem for further study?

THE PURPOSE OF A LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature reviews have different purposes depending on the nature of the inquiry. If the nature of the inquiry is to argue a position about the current state of knowledge on a topic, then you are doing a **basic literature review**. If the nature of the inquiry is to uncover a research problem for further study, then you are doing an **advanced literature review**.

The basic literature review (Figure I.1) summarizes and evaluates the existing knowledge on a particular topic. Its purpose is to produce a position on the state of that knowledge; this is the thesis.

The basic literature review begins by selecting and identifying a **research interest** or issue for inquiry; this is the study question. As you proceed, you will narrow and clarify this interest into a research topic. The research topic clearly identifies and frames the literature review. The outcome of the literature review will be the development of a case that argues the research thesis. A class research assignment or master’s degree thesis may require a basic literature review.

Figure I.1 The Basic Literature Review

The advanced literature review (Figure I.2) has additional demands. Its purpose is to question the current state of knowledge about a topic in order to define an area for new research.

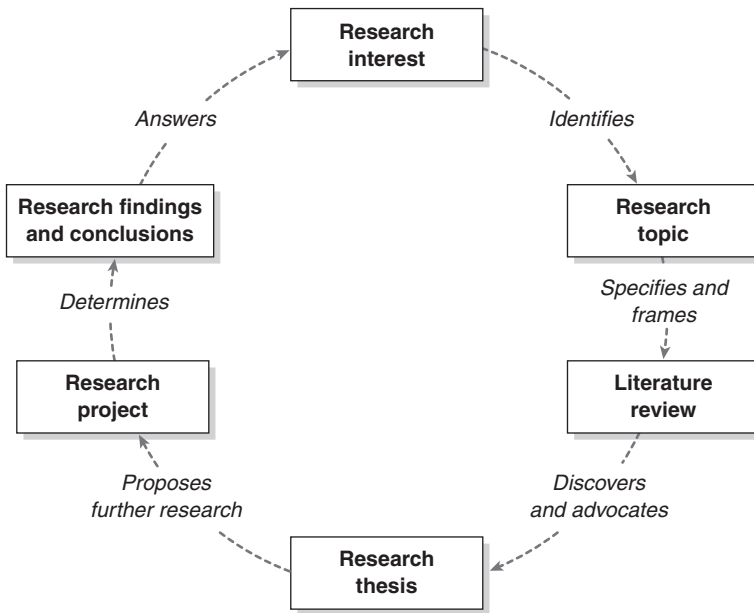
In the advanced literature review, the researcher first addresses the current state of knowledge about the study question. Then, based on these findings, the researcher proposes a thesis defining an issue for further study. Advanced master's theses, and all doctoral dissertations, use the advanced literature review as the basis for discovering what is not yet known about the topic.

While basic reviews and advanced reviews seek different outcomes, the way they uncover knowledge and produce a thesis is similar.

THE LITERATURE REVIEW DEFINED

A **literature review** is a written argument that promotes a thesis position by building a case from credible evidence based on previous research. It provides the context and the background about the

Figure I.2 The Advanced Literature Review

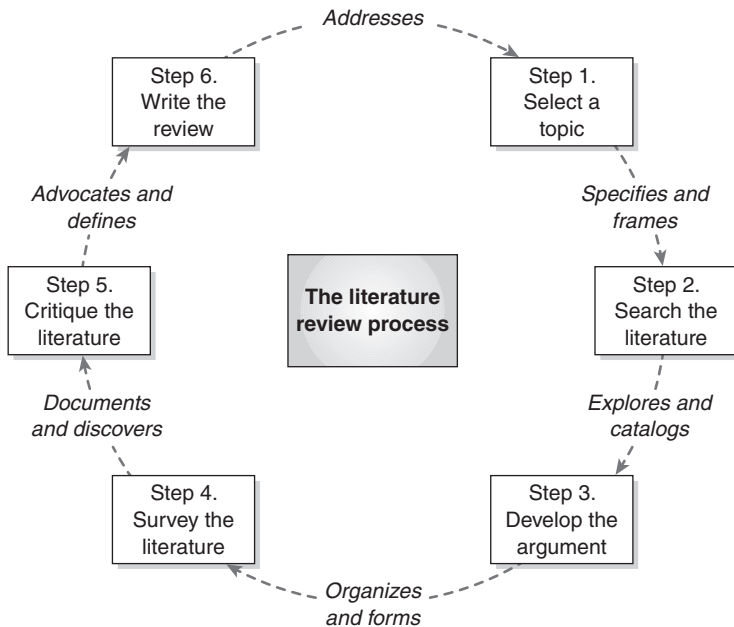


current knowledge of the topic and lays out a logical case to defend the thesis position taken. Here is our definition of the outcome of a literature review:

A literature review is a written document that presents a logically argued case founded on a comprehensive understanding of the current state of knowledge about a topic of study. This case establishes a convincing thesis to answer the study's question.

THE LITERATURE REVIEW PROCESS

A literature review is an organized way to research the chosen topic. Figure I.3 shows the steps for conducting a literature review.

Figure I.3 The Literature Review Model

Conducting a literature review is developmental, with each of the six steps leading to the next (Figure I.3). The following is a brief explanation of these six steps:

Step 1. Select a Topic

A successful research **topic** is usually the offspring of an interest in a practical problem. That interest statement must be reshaped appropriately, converting it from everyday language to formal academic language. The topic must be stated as a well-defined statement that directs the researcher to the pertinent academic discipline. Specifying the language, refining the focus of the interest, and selecting the academic vantage point are the tasks necessary to develop a research topic. Step 1 is also where the writing process begins. Keeping a journal of your progress begins here and is

essential to internalizing the material. Your journal will help you clarify your ideas and plans.

Step 2. Search the Literature

A literature search determines what data will be in the review. It does this by winnowing the research information to only the data that provide the strongest evidence to support the thesis. When searching the literature, you must preview, select, and organize the data for study by using the skills of skimming, scanning, and mapping the data. Next, you catalog and document the relevant data.

Step 3. Develop the Argument

The successful thesis case is built in two parts. You first need to form and then argue your case. To form your case, arrange your findings logically. To present the case, you need to organize the relevant data into a body of evidence that explains what is known about the topic.

Step 4. Survey the Literature

The literature survey assembles, organizes, and analyzes the data to present the current knowledge on the topic. The evidence is logically arranged to produce a set of defensible conclusions about what is known concerning the topic.

Step 5. Critique the Literature

The literature critique interprets the evidence found in the survey of literature. This evidence is logically arranged to form the argument that justifies the thesis statement. It analyzes how current knowledge answers the research question.

Step 6. Write the Review

Writing the review produces a document that communicates the results of the project. Through composing and refining, the written literature review becomes a work that accurately conveys the research and that the intended audience can understand. Composition requires writing, auditing, and editing to produce a polished final

composition. The writing done in the first five steps becomes the foundation for the finished product.

The preceding discussion of the literature review, although condensed, shows the necessary steps to complete a literature review. The following chapters describe the specifics for each step and will help you complete each of the essential tasks for building a strong thesis position and conducting a good review. We turn now to a discussion of fundamentals—inquiry, including researcher mind-set, and planning.

INQUIRY: THE NECESSARY PRECONDITION

All successful research begins with inquiry. The researcher must have an inquiring mind, a natural curiosity, and a fundamental need to learn and to discover. The researcher must have an awareness, which senses when data are missing or insufficient to make the argument.

Curiosity creates the sparks that ignite a need to explore what lies beyond the currently known. This fire, in turn, sprouts the seeds that become the fragile beginnings of the research itself. Inquiring researchers begin their work with a question: Why? What if? Is it true? These questions, and others like them, stimulate the inquiry.

- The inquiring researcher knows that each person has biases, opinions, beliefs, values, and experiences that come together to create a unique perspective. While these are fundamental human traits, researchers set them aside during the research process.
- The inquiring researcher comes to the research with an open mind. This researcher is objective and has no predetermined conclusions. This researcher is open to seeing all results of the inquiry and weighs the value of each piece of evidence.
- The inquiring researcher looks for nuances when noting data, constantly searching for connections and patterns in the data. A good researcher sees both the trees and the forest.
- The inquiring researcher thinks critically, weighing all data for veracity and value. This researcher seeks evidence, examines the pros and cons of any questions, and makes thesis claims based on strong evidence-based arguments.
- The inquiring researcher proceeds with diligence. Any solid research demands many hours of painstaking work. Data identification, collection, cataloging, and documenting need

large blocks of time. All good research builds on a thorough investigation of the facts.

- The inquiring researcher reflects continually. This inquirer advances with skepticism and questions everything: What did I do? What does it mean? How did it work? What should I do next? The inquiring researcher is constantly learning, reflecting on past work in order to navigate the present work.
- The inquiring researcher works ethically. Plagiarism of ideas and words is unthinkable. The ethical inquirer acknowledges all who have come before and understands what Newton meant when he wrote to Robert Hooke, “If I have seen farther it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants.”

ETHICS

Every undertaking has a code of ethics. Researching and writing are no different. Consider the following tenants before you begin your work.

- Do not take data out of context. You may not manipulate data to defend a preferred outcome. This is not just a matter of not fabricating data, but also excludes overstating the data’s value.
- Do your own research. Librarians and other assistants are there to point you in the right direction. They should not be the ones to paddle the canoe through the research sites and library stacks.
- Present only what you believe to be factual. Do not intentionally use fallacious arguments to prove your case.
- Present all sides of the question. Do not be tempted to strengthen your case by omitting divergent evidence. You are searching for the truth, not enforcing a personal opinion.
- Remember that plagiarism is not just using another person’s words. It also includes presenting ideas as your own when they are actually from another’s research source. Plagiarism can easily sneak into a review unless it is carefully avoided.
- Remain the sole writer of your literature review. Outside readers and editors can be very helpful, but they must maintain an advisory role and not become the authors of the research project.

These behaviors are tools for producing high-quality work, ethical research, and good science. Remember: In order to go fast, you must go slow.

PACK WISELY BEFORE YOU BEGIN

The secret of any successful journey, and a literature review is indeed a kind of journey, is planning and preparation. The successful reviewer must be physically and emotionally ready, and must have a plan of action. Doing a literature review well demands a commitment of focused time and effort, which will probably require a fundamental reorganization of daily life. A project such as a literature review cannot take place “when time allows,” because time would probably never allow. Rather than trying to integrate this new work into the already-busy day, the reviewer should seek creative scheduling solutions.

First, organize a workspace free from distractions. You will need a computer with an Internet connection, copying and printing capability, notepads, writing instruments, and filing space. You will also need at least one high-quality dictionary and a thesaurus. Reference works on research methods and writing skills can also be useful. Reference tools, while available in hard copy, can now be found in abundance in the Internet environment. Plan the space, and arrange it before you begin. As with any complex project, the literature review demands concentrated mental focus. Mental discipline, in turn, demands emotional balance.

Having a plan increases productivity. Develop a three-tiered plan. First, create an overall project time line. Second, divide the plan into sections, and create intermediate goals. Finally, build daily plans from the subsections to schedule the work for each daily session. Remember, a plan implies a goal. Give yourself permission to modify your plan, but never proceed without one. Plans provide direction and organization. They build a structure to address the ambiguous and complex world of the literature review. Our suggestions for planning are as follows:

1. Use the literature review model, Figure I.3, to form the overall plan. First, estimate the available monthly research time that you have for the project. Calculate this in hours. Then, estimate the number of hours it will take to complete the tasks for each step of the literature review. If you are not comfortable assigning task times, consult with colleagues or faculty who are experienced in literature research. Next, build a time line for the research. Be sure to include extra time for unplanned eventualities.

2. Subdivide the plan by benchmarks that will serve as intermediate goals for the research. These benchmarks can be time or task driven. A monthly design is one choice if time is the measurement for progress, while the steps of the literature review model are ideal if task completion is the measure of progress. Put the benchmarks on a time line, and readjust the overall plan as necessary. The benchmark division drives the work. It provides a solid schedule to address the tasks. At this point, the work becomes tangible.
3. Build daily plans for action. Each work session must have its goals. If possible, schedule at least a two-hour block of time for each session. Early morning works best for many accomplished writers, allowing the reviewer to focus and concentrate more easily. Schedule quiet time with no interruptions. We recommend daily sessions. While two-hour sessions each day may be impractical, daily work on the project is advantageous. Allowing extended time between work sessions will blur your focus. The literature review is a serious undertaking that builds one day at a time. You cannot succeed by leaving the work for the last minute. Of course, as you use the daily schedule, your benchmarks and the overall plan may need to change.

TIPS

- Study the literature review model (Figure 1.3) carefully. Memorize it if possible. Use this figure to keep yourself on track.
- Select a topic that is important to you. A subject of true concern or curiosity will produce better work than a topic chosen for expediency.
- Write out your topic. Include in this earliest writing what you already know, or think you know, about the topic. This writing will be the beginning of your project journal.
- Plan every step, and write it out. Going back to pick up missed steps takes far more time than completing the work diligently in order.
- Start writing now. Keep a journal of you ideas, progress, and questions.

SUMMARY

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a general introduction to both the conduct and the product of a literature review. The chapter also provides a discussion of what it means to be an inquirer, and gives a description of the traits of a good researcher. This chapter ends with preparation tips to help launch a successful literature review. With a preliminary understanding of the project, a thoughtful mind-set, and a plan, you are ready to tackle developing the research topic, which is the subject of Chapter 1.

CHECKLIST

Write out your responses to the checklist given below. Review what you have written for accuracy and feasibility.

Task	Completed
1. Write the definition and the purpose of a literature review.	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. What general interest are you going to explore? Be specific.	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Describe your plan to use the six steps needed to create a successful literature review.	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Describe the tools and workspace you have planned. How will you create your space?	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. After reflecting on what you have written, what do you still need to learn in order to move ahead?	<input type="checkbox"/>

Step 1. Select a Topic

❖ **Task 1.** Choose a Research Interest

❖ **Task 2.** Refine Personal Interest to Research Interest

Activity 1. Specify Your Interest

Activity 2. Focus Your Interest

Activity 3. Select Your Perspective

Activity 4. Reflect and Refine

❖ **Task 3.** Identify Preliminary Research Topic

Activity 1. Consult Subject Dictionaries and Thesauri to Define Your Topic

Activity 2. Consult Subject Encyclopedias and Handbooks for Access to Academic Discourse on Your Topic

Activity 3. Consult With Your Research Librarian

❖ **Task 4.** Write the Preliminary Research Topic Statement