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By: Derek Jansen (MBA) | October 2019 Quality research is about building on the existing work of others, standing on the shoulders of giants, as Newton put it. In the literature report chapter of your dissertation or dissertation, you will summarize these preliminary works and lay the foundation for your own research. So it is no surprise that it is crucial. In this article, I'll show you exactly how to write a literature review in three simple steps so that you can conquer this important chapter (the intelligent way). But first the why. . Before we begin writing the literature review chapter, we need to look at WHY. To put it bluntly, if you do not understand the true purpose of this chapter, there is no way to deduct it well. So, what exactly is the purpose of the literature review process? There are at least four core functions: to get an understanding (and demonstrate this understanding) of where the research is currently, what are the main arguments, conflicts, and so on. So that you can identify the gaps in the literature and then use them as justification for your research topic. To help you create a theoretical framework for empirical testing (if applicable to your research topic). To inform your methodological decisions (i.e. see which methods have been used in similar studies) and help to obtain proven questionnaires (for interviews) and measurement tools (for surveys). Most students understand the first point, but don't think about the rest. To make the most of the literature review process, you need to keep an eye on all four points when reviewing the literature (more on that, coming soon), or you'll end up with a wondrous foundation. Right – with the WHY out of the way, let's go to the HOW. As mentioned above, writing your literature review is a process that I break down into three steps: searching for the most appropriate literature (treasure hunt). Understanding, distilling and organizing literature. Plan and write your literature review. It is important that you complete steps one and two before you begin writing the chapter. I know it's very tempting, but don't try to kill and write two birds with one flap as you read. You will inevitably waste huge amounts of time rewriting and rewriting, or you will simply end up with a disjointed, hard-to-digest mess. Instead, you must first read and distill the information, then schedule and run the writing. Trust me on this! Overview: How To A Literature Review Of course, the first step in the literature review journey is to hunt down the existing research that is relevant to your subject. While you probably already have a decent basis for this from your research proposal, you need to significantly expand this in the dissertation or dissertation itself. Essentially, you need to for existing literature that may help you answer (or develop) your research question if it hasn't been pinned down yet). So, you have to put on your hunting cap. There are many ways to find relevant literature, but I'll cover my four best tactics here. I would suggest combining all four methods to make sure nothing slips past you: Method 1 – Google Scholar Scrubbing Google's academic search engine, Google Scholar, is a good starting point as it provides a good high-level view of the relevant journal articles for each keyword you throw at it. Most importantly, it tells you how many times each article has been quoted, giving you an idea of how credible (or at least popular) it is. Some items may be available for free, while others need an account that takes us to the next method. Method 2 – University database Scrounging In general, universities provide students with access to an online library that provides access to many (but not all) major journals. So if you find an article with Google Scholar that requires paid access (which is very likely), search for that article in your university's database—if it's listed there, you'll have access. Note that in general, the search engine capabilities of these databases are poor, so make sure you search for the exact item name or you won't find it. Method 3 - JournalArticle Snowballing At the end of each academic journal article, you will find a list of references. As with any academic writing, these references are the building blocks of the article, so if the article is relevant to your subject, there is a good chance that some of the referenced works will be. Make a quick scan of the titles and see what seems relevant, and then search for the relevant ones in your university's database. Method 4 – Dissertation Scavenging Similar to Method 3 above, you can use other students' dissertations. All you need to do is browse through literature review chapters of existing dissertations on your subject and you will find a gold mine of potential literature. Normally, your university gives you access to previous student dissertations, but you can also find a much larger selection in the following databases: ProQuest Open Access Theses & Dissertations EBSCO Stanford SearchWorks Remember that dissertations and dissertations are not as academically sound as published peer-reviewed journal articles (because they are written by students, not professionals) , so be sure to check the of all the sources that you can find with this method. You can do this by rate the number of quotes for a particular article in Google Scholar. If you need help assessing the credibility of an article, or finding relevant research results in general, you can chat with one of our research specialists. All right - with a good basis of literature under your belt, it's time to move on to the next step. Once you've built up a small trove of items, it's time to read and digest the information – what does all this mean? While I present steps one and two (hunting and digestion) as sequential, in reality it's more of a back and forth tango – they'll read a little bit, then have an idea, recognize a new quote or a new potential variable, and then look for articles again. This is quite natural – through the reading process, your thoughts develop, new ways could emerge, direction adjustments could arise. This is, after all, one of the main purposes of the literature review process (i.e. to familiarize yourself with the current state of research in your field). As you work through your treasure chest, it is important that you start organizing the information at the same time. There are three aspects: logging reference information Creating an organized catalog distillation and synthesis of information I will discuss each of these following: 2.1 – Log the reference information as you read each article, you should add it to your reference management software. I usually recommend Mendeley for this purpose (see mendeley 101 video below), but you can use the software that will make you feel comfortable. Most importantly, make sure you load EVERY article you read in your reference manager, even if it doesn't seem very relevant at this time. In the beginning, you can be sure that you can remember who said what, where and what their main arguments were. Trust me, you won't. If you do a thorough review of the relevant literature (as you need!), you will read many, many articles, and it is simply impossible to remember who said what, when and in what context. Even without the bird's-eye view offered by a catalogue, you will miss connections between different articles and have no idea how the research has evolved over time. Simply put, it is important to create your own catalog of literature. I would suggest using Excel to create your catalog as it allows you to run filters, color code, and sorting—all very useful when your list becomes large (which it will do). How you interpret your spreadsheet is up to you, but I would suggest that you have the following columns (at least): Author, Date, Title – Start with three columns that contain this core information. This makes it easier for you to search for titles with specific words, the order in which you search by date, or group by author. Categories Keywords—You can either create multiple columns, one for each category/topic, and then tick the corresponding categories, or you can have a column of keywords. Main Arguments/Points— Use this column to succinctly convey the essence of the article, the key arguments, and implications for your research. Context - - the socio-economic context in which the research was carried out. For example: U.S.-based respondents aged 25-35, low-income people, etc. This will be useful to argue about gaps in research. Methodology - Note which methodology was used and why. Also note all the problems you feel arise due to the methodology. Again, you can use this to make an argument about gaps in research. Quotes - Write down all the citation lines that you think will be useful later. Notes - Note something that isn't covered yet. For example, links to or disagreements with other theories, asked, but unanswered, flaws or limitations, and so on. If you want, you can try the free Excel template from Grad Coach here (see screenshot below). Most importantly, when you work through the literature and create your catalog, you have to put all the information together in your own mind – how does it all fit together? Look for connections between the different articles and try to develop a larger image view of the state of the research. Some important questions you need to ask yourself are: what answers does existing research provide to my own research questions? On what points do the researchers agree (and disagree)? How has research evolved over time? What are the gaps in current research? To help you develop a large-screen view and synthesize all the information, you might find mind mapping software like Freemind useful. If you're a fan of physical notes, investing in a big whiteboard can work for you. Step 3: Outline and write down! Once you are satisfied that you have digested and distilled all relevant literature in your head, it is time to put pen to paper (or rather, finger on the keyboard). There are two steps here – Outlines and Writing: 3.1 – Draw your outline After so much time reading, it might be tempting to simply start writing without having a clear structure in mind. However, it is critical to decide on your structure and develop a detailed outline before you write anything. Your literature review chapter must present a clear, logical and easy-to-understand narrative – and that requires some planning. Don't try to wing it! Of course, you won't always follow the plan in a letter-like way, but without a detailed outline you'll end up with more than likely a disjointed pile of waffles, and then you'll be much more with rewriting, hacking and patching. Measuring the proverb twice, once cutting is very suitable here. With regard to the structure, you must first decide whether to interpret your rating thematically (in topics) or chronologically (by date/period). The right choice depends on your subject, research objectives and research questions, so I can't give any advice in this article. You can use our research specialists, if you would like to receive personal advice. Once this is decided, you need to create an overview of your entire chapter in bulleted point format. Try to get as detailed as possible so that you know exactly what you're doing where, how each section will be connected to the next, and how your entire argument will evolve throughout the chapter. Also, at this stage, it's a good idea to assign rough word count limits for each section so that you can identify word count issues before you spend weeks or months writing! 3.2 – Write with a detailed outline on your side, it's time to start writing (finally!) At this stage, it is common to feel a bit of a writer's block and to delay under the pressure of finally having to put something on paper. To help, remember that the goal of the first draft isn't perfection – it's easy to get your thoughts out of your head and on paper after which you can refine them. The structure can change a little, the word count assignments can shift and mix, you can add or remove a section—that's all right. Don't worry about all this on your first draft – just get your thoughts on paper. Once you have a full first draft (however rough it may be), step away from it for a day or two (longer if you can) and then come back to it with fresh eyes. Pay particular attention to the flow and narrative – does it fit together and flow smoothly from one section to another? Now is the time to improve the link from each section to the next, streamline writing to be more concise, shorten the number of words, and send it into a more digestible read. Once you've done this, write your letter to a friend or colleague who is not an expert and ask him if he understands the overall discussion. The best way to judge this is to ask them to explain the chapter to you again. This technique gives you a strong indication of which points have been clearly communicated and which have not. If you're working with Grad Coach, this is a good time to have your Research Specialist reviewed in your chapter. Then tighten it and send it to your manager to comment on it. Some might argue that you should send your work to your manager sooner than this (in fact, your university might require this formally), but in my experience, the supervisors are extremely close to time (and often patient), so the more refined your chapter is, the less time it takes. they're wasting them to address basic issues (which you already know) and the more time they'll spend on valuable feedback that increases your Mark earning potential. Recap: How to write a literature review In this article, we've covered how to research and write up a winning literature review chapter. Let's make a brief summary of the most important points: to understand the WHY of the literature review before you read or write anything. Make sure you understand the 4 core features of the process. The first step is to hunt down the relevant literature. You can do this with Google Scholar, your university database, snowball technology and by reviewing other dissertations and dissertations. Next, you need to log all articles in your reference manager, create your own literature catalog, and synthesize all your research. After that, you need to develop a detailed overview of your entire chapter—the more detailed, the better. Do not start without writing a clear outline (on paper, not in your head!) Write your first design in rough form - don't aim for perfection. Remember, finished beats perfect. Refine your second design and get a layman's perspective on it. Then tighten it and submit to your manager. Supervisor.

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