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Reviewing Literature and Paraphrasing



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Introduction

Whether it is part of a larger assignment, or a standalone piece in itself, a literature review covers the process of reading, reviewing, and evaluating a selection of sources about a particular topic. You are being asked to look at what other authors have said and to analyse and assess their contributions.

Most essays and dissertations will include literature reviews, whether as part of the main body of the text, or as a separate section under its own subheading. The purpose is to demonstrate that you have engaged with the topic of the assignment fully by reading a wide range of sources and by understanding what the sources are saying about the topic.

The literature review

The literature review can be divided into the following steps:

1. Literature search
2. Sorting the literature
3. Analysing the literature
4. Comparison
5. Structure of literature review
6. Writing the literature review

1. Literature search

A good place to find literature is in the reading list set by your tutor to accompany your assignment. This is not an exhaustive list of all reading on the topic, but it can act as a good starting point from which you will be expected to find other sources. You can also conduct your own searches. Read your assignment brief and identify the key words, then use 'Library search' on the Library website <https://www.salford.ac.uk/library> to find relevant sources. If you need help in finding sources, go to a workshop or contact your Academic Support Librarian <https://www.salford.ac.uk/skills-for-learning>

2. Sorting the literature

There are so many sources it can be difficult to decide what to read. To make it easier try reading the abstract section of a journal article or the chapter titles of a book before deciding if it really is useful. Divide your sources into related groups or themes. This will help you with reading and understanding, as well as provide some order when you write the literature review. Remember to make a note of each source for your in-text citations and reference list.

3. Analysing the literature

When reading sources for a literature review, always bear in mind what you want to achieve from the review. What are the key points you want to get across to the reader about this area of research? Look for themes or opinions expressed in more than one source, as well as those sources which disagree with each other. It is useful to take notes from each source you read so you can summarise more effectively.

You should also be aware of the usefulness of a source – is it giving you relevant information? If not

then it does not need to be part of the literature review. Be brutal - a literature review is not an exercise in quantity but in quality; you are expected to write about good sources, not lots of irrelevant ones.

Look for the date of publication – is it the most up-to-date source on the topic, and if not, is it still useful or have more recent sources made it obsolete? You might want to record if this has happened, as a literature review may involve looking at how opinion or theory has changed over time.

4. Comparison

Look at all your sources in relation to each other. Do they support each other or contradict each other? Which source supports each part of your argument? Can you group any of them together once you have read them?

5. Structuring the literature review

Plan your structure like you would with any assignment (i.e. a beginning, middle and end). Have a short introduction and conclusion and use your notes to help you decide where each

paragraph should go.

You might find it easier if you use a mind map or other form of visual planning method to organise your sources. Sources which say the same thing can be written on the plan in the same colour, or grouped together. Ideas and sources which are related can be connected with lines of one colour, whilst sources which argue other viewpoints can be linked using another colour.

Another idea is to write a brief overview of each source on a post-it note so you can move them around and change their position relative to other sources. You might find this useful if you read a source which changes the structure of the literature review (it might contradict a previously authoritative source, or highlight a group of sources as being more significant than they were before).

6. Writing the literature review

Take all the steps above and you will find that the writing of the literature review is easier than it would be without planning. A good plan in particular will help with the writing.

Remember to introduce the subject of your literature

in the introduction. The aim of your review is not to simply describe each source in isolation, but to explain how they function as a body of work and how they reinforce or contradict each other. Use what you have read to reach conclusions and explain them to the reader.

If the literature review is a separate piece, stick to the word limit as you would with any other sort of assignment. If the literature review is part of a larger assignment you might want to ask your tutor about how long it should be. This can vary depending on the subject, so it is best to check before you begin.

You can include quotations from sources where they are necessary. If your literature review is part of a larger piece you will probably not be required to include a large number of quotations as these will appear elsewhere in the assignment. If it is a literature review on its own then including quotations can help the reader understand the sources better. Again, ask your tutor if you are not sure how many quotations are acceptable.

Sample literature review structure

Imagine you have eight sources from which the main theme is:

Alexander the Great showed his strength by creating an empire that reached as far afield as India.

However, two sources point out that:

The total absence of any mention of Alexander or his empire in contemporary Indian sources suggests his empire was not very powerful and did not make much impression in India.

During the course of the literature review you will talk about the sources and how they address the main theme and the counterargument:

The invasion of India was the highpoint of Alexander's reign, and came not long after his wedding (McBride, 1986). It has been theorised that Alexander's marriage enabled him to invade India because it gave him an alliance through marriage with Bactria,

in what is now northern Afghanistan (O'Reilly, 2005).

The impact of Alexander's invasion of India on Western historiography was great; many sources record the feat, and accord it great significance (Fernandez, 1991; Finton, 1998).

However this was not replicated in Indian historiography where Alexander is barely mentioned and his achievements were not considered significant in the country's history (Choudary, 2000).

Finally, you will sum up the sources in relation to each other:

The majority of the literature on Alexander the Great uses the extension of his empire as far as India as a measure of his success. However some sources make the point that Indian historiography considers Alexander's incursion to have been so insignificant as to pass unnoticed, challenging the view that it was a universally strong empire.

All references in this example are made up.

What is paraphrasing?

Using your own words to explain what others have said is called paraphrasing. Paraphrasing is an essential skill for literature reviews. The key to doing it well is to first understand what you have read. Try looking at the source(s) as a whole. Paraphrasing is not an exercise in re-wording each sentence, one at a time - doing so is poor academic practice.

Here is an original passage from van Emden (2001). *Effective Communication for Science and Technology*. Basingstoke: Palgrave. The subject is the transition from school to higher education.

“The relationship between teacher and taught is different; students no longer have a tightly structured day which they are more or less compelled to follow; the amount of work achieved is largely the concern of the individual; new students suddenly find they have responsibilities that they have never had to consider before, such as accommodation, food and budgeting” (van Emden, 2001, p.1).

Now read a student's attempt at paraphrasing it.

Paraphrasing example 1

Teachers and taught have a different relationship; there is no tightly structured day which students are compelled to follow, more or less; it is the concern of the individual what amount of work they achieve; food, budgeting and accommodation are amongst the responsibilities that new students will find that they have never experienced before (van Emden, 2001, p.1).

Even with the reference, this is still a very bad piece of writing. The words have merely been moved around. It would be considered plagiarism even if it is referenced, which can result in the whole piece being failed, with potentially even more serious consequences. Even if you do reference, lazy paraphrasing like this is unlikely to get you any marks as your tutor will not be able to see any evidence that you have understood the piece.

Here is the piece again, but with the words altered in each sentence.

Paraphrasing example 2

Students work differently with their teachers; the day is not planned out strictly with mandatory classes at all times; students must keep a track on their own workloads; there will be a range of new concerns like living conditions and finance (van Emden, 2001, p.1).

This is still bad paraphrasing, because it is structured and written so similarly to the original. Good paraphrasing involves breaking free from the structure of the original. Do not copy the exact sentence order where it is possible to avoid it.

Here is the piece paraphrased well, condensing the passage into its essential information.

Paraphrasing example 3

Students will find they have more independence and more personal responsibility. It is up to them to do their work, attend their classes, and look after non-academic concerns, possibly for the first time (van Emden, 2001)

A good paraphrase can usually summarise a source in fewer words than are used in the source itself. This shows that you have understood the piece. In this case, the writer has demonstrated that the original piece was not a list for its own sake, it was using the list format to convey the message that higher education would involve more independent action by the student. Always look for the overall message in a piece.

Top tips for doing a literature review

1. Keep referring back to your research question or assignment brief during your literature search and review so that you stay **focused** on relevant material.
2. Make a **note** of all the sources you read as you go along. This makes finding sources and compiling your reference list easier.
3. Sometimes students find it difficult to know when to stop reading or writing. One solution is to calculate the **word count** for each section of the review and try to stick to it. Setting a limit will encourage you to select only key texts and to write concisely.

You might also find these Study Guides useful:

Critical analysis

Reading and note making

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