

Third Edition

The Literature Review

A step-by-step guide for students

Diana Ridley



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About the Author

Diana Ridley has worked in various UK universities and schools since 1981. She was a Senior Lecturer in the Institute of Education at Sheffield Hallam University, UK, where she was the course leader for the MA TESOL programme. She has supervised both master's and doctoral students in the fields of English-language teaching and academic literacies as well as teaching on both undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses. Prior to her role at SHU, Diana was an English teacher in Spain and a teacher trainer in Tanzania. She has also taught English as an additional language in both the primary and secondary sectors in the UK and English for Academic Purposes in a number of UK universities. At the University of Sheffield, she developed and delivered a thesis writing course for doctoral students as part of a wider research training programme. Her own PhD research was in the area of academic literacies, focusing on the role of the literature review in postgraduate research writing and the journeys that research students travel when working on this aspect of their studies. Over the years, her teaching and research interests have been in the areas of discourse and genre analysis, sociolinguistics, English as an additional language, academic literacies and qualitative research methodologies.

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1

Introduction

‘The first thing you must do is conduct a comprehensive literature review.’ This is one of the early tasks that many research students are asked to undertake by their supervisors. It can sometimes be frustrating, when you are keen to start researching a particular problem that you have identified, to be advised to go and search for relevant work done by others, to identify pertinent theories, or just generally to read around the subject. However, it *is* important to explore the field in which you are going to do your research and gain a thorough awareness and understanding of current work and perspectives in the area so that you can position your own research clearly on the academic map of knowledge creation. An essential aspect of academic research is that it has connections with the work of others.

‘But where do I start?’ and ‘What exactly is a literature review, anyway?’ are common questions. It is not unusual to feel somewhat baffled when trying to work out exactly what is expected. To be tackled successfully, it requires thoughtful organisation and planning from the beginning. It is therefore helpful to give careful consideration to the following questions in the context of your own discipline:

- 1 What is a literature review and what purposes does it serve in relation to your research?
- 2 Why is it such a vital component of research?
- 3 What are the various ways it can be realised in a dissertation or thesis?
- 4 What does the process of completing a literature review involve?

I begin to address these questions here and elaborate further on the ideas throughout later chapters. The book as a whole contains:

- extensive practical tips on how to prepare, organise and write your review successfully;
- extracts from a variety of different sample dissertations and theses to illustrate the points being suggested;
- tasks for you to do which involve observations and analysis of the dissertation and thesis text extracts and reflection on a range of aspects of your own research and literature review.

It can therefore be used as a self-study guide by reading it fully at the start for an overview or referring to relevant chapters as needed during your research. However, I would recommend beginning with Chapters 1 to 5 because they focus on strategies for conducting efficient searches of the literature, and techniques for reading efficiently and organising the information you collect. Chapters 6 to 10 will become more pertinent when you prepare to write your review and will continue to be relevant as you draft and revise your work. Chapter 11 discusses the purposes and processes involved in conducting a systematic literature review, which differs from a thesis or dissertation literature review. This is because it is a stand-alone investigation, usually conducted by a team of experienced researchers. Yet most of this book assumes that you are a student conducting research for an undergraduate, master's or doctoral programme, or a supervisor of a student undertaking such research.

After working through the guide, I hope that you will have a new awareness of the issues involved and can navigate your way through the maze of identifying and efficiently reading the pertinent literature, as well as writing an effective literature review which blends in with your own research.

In this initial chapter, I define the term 'literature review'; discuss the significance of the literature review in research; and suggest alternative ways that the literature review can be positioned in the final draft of a dissertation or thesis, giving the contents pages of dissertation and thesis case studies as examples.

What is a Literature Review?

When attempting a definition of this complex phenomenon, it is helpful to break it down into two parts: first, the finished *product* of the literature review which appears in the final draft of the dissertation or thesis; and second, the *process* that is involved in conducting a review of the literature.

The 'literature review' is the part of the thesis where there is extensive reference to related research and theory in your field; it is where connections are made between the source texts that you draw on and where you position yourself and your research among these sources. It is your opportunity to engage in a written dialogue with researchers in your area while at the same time showing that you have engaged with, understood and responded to the relevant body of knowledge underpinning your research. The literature review is where you identify the theories and previous research which have influenced your choice of research topic and the methodology you are choosing to adopt. Once you have identified a problem or area to focus on, you can use the literature to illustrate that there is a gap in previous research which needs to be filled. The literature review, therefore, serves as a jumping-off point for your own research investigation.

The term 'literature review' also refers to the process involved in creating the review that appears in your dissertation or thesis. It is an ongoing activity which begins when you pick up the first book or article related to your research and continues until the day you finish the final draft. Initially, your literature review helps you to formulate your research questions; at the same time, you begin to identify the relevant theories and related research

studies to your own and the methodology that you might adopt for your research. Later, the literature assists you in the analysis and interpretation of your data. This book explores all aspects of the process including literature search strategies, systems for storing your key sources and notes, reading strategies and techniques for writing the review.

Some additional definitions of the literature review from other authors are given below to show the varying emphases that different study guides put on its role and purpose.

Literature reviews should be succinct and ... give a picture of the state of knowledge and of major questions in your topic area.

(Bell, 2024)

[A literature review can be defined as] a critical analysis of existing literature (published and unpublished sources) on a specific topic or research question. It is an essential component of scholarly (e.g. academic) and interventionist (e.g. social policy) projects by serving multiple key purposes that include – surveying existing knowledge and evidence on a topic, identifying trends and gaps in knowledge and practice, contextualising a topic or problem, identifying a theoretical framework, providing guidance for methodology, and preventing duplication of research.

(Hart, 2025)

Typically, the literature review forms an important chapter in the thesis, where its purpose is to provide the background to and justification for the research undertaken.

(Bruce, 1994)

[The purpose of the literature review] is to locate the research project, to form its context or background, and to provide insights into previous work.

(Blaxter et al., 2010)

[A literature review should] demonstrate ... a fully professional grasp of the background theory to your subject.

(Phillips and Pugh, 2022)

[In a literature review a writer] extracts and synthesises the main points, issues, findings and research methods which emerge from a critical review of the readings.

(Nunan, 1992)

[The literature review should be] a coherent argument that leads to the description of a proposed study.

(Rudestam and Newton, 2014)

From these definitions and quotes, we can see that the literature review serves many different purposes and entails a wide variety of activities. It is therefore not surprising that it may

seem a formidable task – particularly at the beginning. However, a thoroughly researched and well-written review can be both an exciting and a rewarding experience.

The Literature Review at Different Degree Levels

Chris Hart (2025) summarises the differences in the characteristics of a literature review at different levels of study and outlines the criteria for a successful review. The information below is taken from his book *Doing a Literature Review: Releasing the Research Imagination*.

Jerry Wellington et al. (2005) discuss the professional doctorate and the role of the literature review, in particular in relation to the EdD thesis. They suggest that a literature review for an EdD degree is likely to be more professionally oriented than for a PhD thesis. It is also likely to be shorter as the usual length of an EdD thesis is about 50,000 words, in comparison to approximately 70,000–80,000 words in a PhD thesis. For different degrees and research projects, the function and format of the literature review will vary.

BA, BSc, BEd Project

The literature review is essentially descriptive and topic focused. It is mostly indicative of main, current sources on the topic. The analysis is of topic in terms of justification.

MA, MSc, MPh Dissertation or Thesis

In these degrees, literature reviews are analytical and summative, covering methodological issues, research techniques and topics. There are possibly two literature-based chapters; one on methodological issues, which demonstrates knowledge of the advantages and disadvantages, and another on theoretical issues relevant to the topic or problem.

PhD, DPhil, DLitt Thesis

Here, the literature reviews are an analytical synthesis, covering all known literature on the problem, including that in other languages. They consist of high-level conceptual thinking within and across theories, and include a summative and formative evaluation of previous work on the problem. Depth and breadth of discussion on relevant philosophical traditions and ways in which they relate to the problem are also involved.

It is also relevant to mention here that there are other types of literature review which are not undertaken as a stepping stone for a piece of primary research. I'll refer to these two main alternatives as: 1) a stand-alone review and 2) a systematic literature review (see Chapter 11). A stand-alone review is a self-contained literature review on a particular topic which could be conducted for an undergraduate or postgraduate module assignment (e.g. a review on learner autonomy for an education assignment). An entire dissertation or thesis could also be a stand-alone review if it involves an in-depth critical exploration of the literature in a

specific area as opposed to being a project including primary data collection and analysis. On the other hand, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, a systematic review is not usually part of a student's assessed degree work. It is a professional and rigorous undertaking which synthesises findings from numerous individual studies on a topic often with a view to informing a policy or health treatment. Search strategies, article selection, and synthesis and analysis of data are all documented and transparent. I discuss this process in more detail in Chapter 11.

The main focus in this book is on a literature review which leads into a research project for a university degree programme and where the final written version appears usually as a chapter or chapters in a dissertation or thesis. Bearing in mind the differences highlighted previously, there are some general principles which can be applied to the process of doing a literature review at all levels and for all degree types. It is the intention of this book to provide such guidance and suggestions on practice.

Why is it Important to Undertake a Literature Review as Part of Your Research?

When you first decide on the problem you think you want to investigate for your research, you may not be thinking extensively about the wider context. But your research is a small piece in a complicated jigsaw puzzle; it does not exist in isolation. It is dependent on what others have done before and you will contribute to an ongoing story or debate. Your reader therefore needs to know about the whole jigsaw puzzle and not simply the shade and shape of your particular piece. In a literature review, you are contextualising your work; you are describing the bigger picture that provides the background and creates the space or gap for your research.

Where do we Find the Literature Review in a Dissertation or Thesis?

The literature review often appears as a distinctive chapter or a group of chapters in the final draft of the dissertation or thesis. The titles for these chapters vary and can often be topic related instead of being called 'the literature review'. However, it is also possible that the literature review may be integrated throughout the whole thesis and a single chapter is not identifiable. In the latter case, it does not mean that a literature review has not been completed as it is an integral part of all research. The researcher has simply chosen to use the related literature in a more integrated way throughout the thesis. This approach is particularly likely to be the case in research which is based on an analysis of texts and documents, such as in history, English literature or biblical studies. Although the extracts from dissertations and theses shown in this book are from identifiable 'literature review' chapters, the guidance offered is also relevant for the integrated literature review as the processes which can be adopted are similar.

How the literature review may be integrated in different theses where there are identifiable literature review chapters and/or sections is illustrated below. There are two main approaches: *dedicated* and *recursive*. In the dedicated approach, the literature review is included in a chapter or series of chapters, frequently with topic-related titles, near the beginning of the thesis. It often begins in the introduction and continues in one or more subsequent chapters. In some fields, such as medicine, the complete literature review may appear as part of the introduction under suitable headings and subheadings. Many doctoral theses, in particular, are made up of a number of different research studies which, although independent, are connected by the overarching umbrella of the research topic. In these cases, the recursive approach is more appropriate, with the literature review likely to reappear at various points in the thesis. It begins in the introduction and then continues at the start of each chapter which presents a different study or group of studies. The different areas covered in the literature review for each study are generally referred to in the thesis introduction where the overall background to the research is provided. Examples of both organisational approaches, taken from the contents pages of PhD theses and an MA dissertation, illustrate the various ways in which the literature review can be integrated into the whole thesis (see Examples 1.1–1.5).

Example 1.1 Contextualising Your Research

A doctoral student in a School of East Asian Studies at a UK university, Key-young Son, was conducting research into President Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy in South Korea. He was investigating strategies of engagement with North Korea and theories of state identity changes which have enabled relations between North and South Korea to improve. Key-young's thesis consisted of eight chapters (363 pages), including an extensive literature review extending over three chapters (144 pages), equating to 40 per cent of the thesis.

In the first literature review chapter, he explored the political theories of 'containment' and 'engagement' in relation to the Cold War. In the second chapter, a theoretical framework for his thesis was established based on the concept of 'comprehensive engagement'. And in his final literature review chapter, he described the historical context for his study by giving an overview of the changing relationship between North and South Korea. This theoretical and historical overview created a context in which to situate the investigation of President Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy in South Korea (1998–2003).

Key-young shows in detail where his research is positioned within the field of research on International Relations. He does not simply tell his reader about the particular events in the Korean Peninsula's history which relate to the Sunshine Policy. He explains the theories used to interpret the events and provides a historical overview of key events that shaped the Sunshine Policy.

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Chapter 8: Conclusion

Source: Son, 2004: ii–vi

Example 1.2 Contextualising Your Research

The following example is from an MPhil to PhD transfer paper. This is a report which is an integral part of the PhD process for the majority of doctoral students at UK universities. The transfer or upgrade paper (it is known by a variety of different names in different universities) is usually submitted approximately one year after starting on a full-time research degree programme. It typically takes the form of an extended research proposal and outlines the background, aims and research questions, significant and relevant literature, and the proposed methodology of the PhD research. It serves as a milestone when both tutors and the student can reflect on and assess progress and decide whether the student is ready to proceed with the research on a PhD programme.

In this example, Hannah is conducting research in the area of children, food and health. The study has been prompted by a concern with childhood obesity. After a brief introduction, presenting the topic of obesity and children's eating practices, Hannah includes the literature review in the second section. It is 39 pages out of a total of 71 for the whole paper (55 per cent of the report). The literature review is divided into six sub-sections including an introduction and