

Your dissertation: The Literature Review

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Research as a party?



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What is a literature review?

What it is NOT:

- a summary or description of what has been written about X
- 'everything I have read about X'

What it is:

A critical overview of scholarly debates/ research that are relevant to your research question

In Plain English...

- What have people said about the issues that are relevant to your research? Why?
- What have they said about each other's work? Why?
- Given the above, what do you think? Why?
- How is the literature you have discussed relevant to your research?

How does the **PROCESS** of reviewing the literature benefit you?

- You find out what has **already been written**
- You can evaluate which information will be **useful**
- It gives you an idea of **possible approaches** to similar research questions
- It establishes **your credibility** with the reader

How does your reader benefit from your literature review?

- You give them **essential background information** about the issues that are relevant to your research
- You tell them **what you think** about this previous research (i.e. you make it clear what your position is)
- You show them where you have identified **a 'gap'** in the existing literature

And so...

- You put **your contribution** in context

What can you include in the literature review?

- Historical **background**
- Contemporary **context**
- Underpinning **theories/concepts**
- Definitions/discussion of **relevant terminology**
- Previous research & its limitations (i.e. the **gap**)
- Why your research is **worth doing**

Where does the literature review go?

A 'literature review' does **NOT** have to be a separate section in all disciplines.

Different disciplines, different norms...

- Part of the introduction?
- A separate chapter?
- Integrated throughout your work?

How can I find this out?

- Look at other dissertations
- Ask your supervisor
- Look at your course handbook

What's important in a literature review?

- Relevance
(What are your research questions?)
- Being critical

A BAD literature review just describes...

Webster (2007) did a study of students' choices of dissertation topics and titles. She found that students usually pick subjects that they are interested in, but make them sound more interesting to other people by using silly titles.

Helgesen's (2008) study of Masters students demonstrated that many students do not feel that their undergraduate dissertation really prepared them for Masters level dissertations. Most of the students she surveyed found that the literature review was the hardest part of the dissertation.

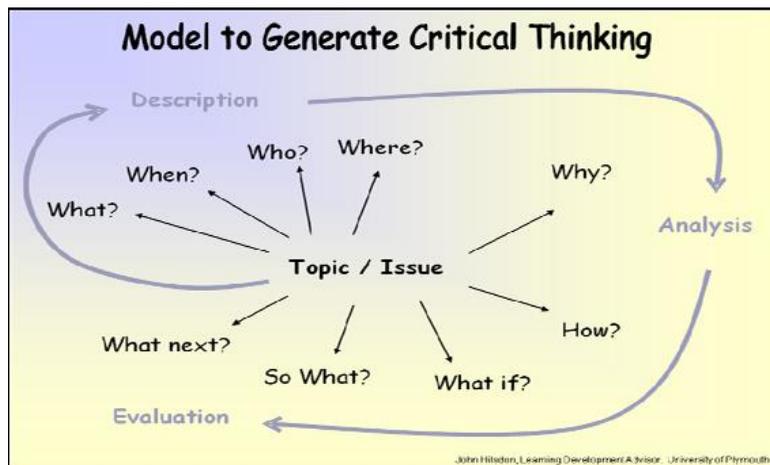
A GOOD literature review positions your research in a debate

Within the literature **there is disagreement over** the extent to which Chinese students can be said to conform to the traditional portrayal of them in the literature. **While** Jones (2009) **claims** that there is some difference between the traditional portrayal and the findings of her study, other writers (Edwards and Ran, 2006) **contend** that there is some similarity. Jones (2009) **asserts** that Chinese students are open to the idea of group work and do not have particularly weak language skills. Edwards and Ran (2006), **however, maintain** that this is not the case. **The current study builds on this premise, and seeks to identify** whether it is possible to detect a difference in English language ability between Chinese undergraduate Business Studies students and other international students on the same course.

What does 'being critical' mean?

- It does **NOT** mean 'say something negative about X'.
- It means **asking questions** of the text /author/ issue under discussion.

Critical Thinking



Being critical

Being critically analytical means asking questions:

- What?
- Why?
- Why in this way?
- What other ways?
- With what effect?
- What does that mean?
- How do you know?
- Who says so?
- What do other people say?
- How + adjective
(How important/ useful/ effective etc)
- So what? (Why should I care?)

Reading critically

- What is the author's **main point** (i.e. what does the author want you to accept)?
- What **conclusions** does the author reach?
- What **evidence** does the author put forward to support his/her arguments and conclusions?
- Is the evidence **strong enough** to support the arguments and conclusions? (If not, why not...?)

(Adapted from Ridley, 2008)

Reading critically

- Is the author's **data collection and interpretation valid**?
- What **assumptions** is the author making? How does this affect their reasoning? Can these assumptions be **challenged**?
- Do their findings **fit with other research**? Is this a mainstream view, or minority?
- What is the **background context** in which the text was written? Does this context **affect** the author's assumptions, the content and how it has been presented?

(Adapted from Ridley, 2008)

Remember, make it clear...

- What people have said about the issues that are relevant to your research
- What they have said about each other's work
- How what they have said is relevant to your research
- What you think about what they have said
- What they have not said/done
- What the value of your research is

Further reading

Jesson, J et al. (2011). *Doing Your Literature Review: Traditional and Systematic Techniques*. London. Sage.

Ridley, D. (2008). *The Literature Review*. London. Sage.

Walliman, N. (2011). *Your Research Project* (3rd edition). London. Sage. (p157-165)

www.monash.edu.au/lls/llonline/writing/general/lit-reviews



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