

SIX
STEPS
TO
SUCCESS

The
Literature
Review

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issue for further study. Advanced master's theses and all doctoral dissertations use the advanced literature review as a stepping-stone for discovering what is not yet known about the topic.

While basic reviews and advanced reviews seek different outcomes, the manner by which they uncover knowledge and produce a thesis are similar and parallel.

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

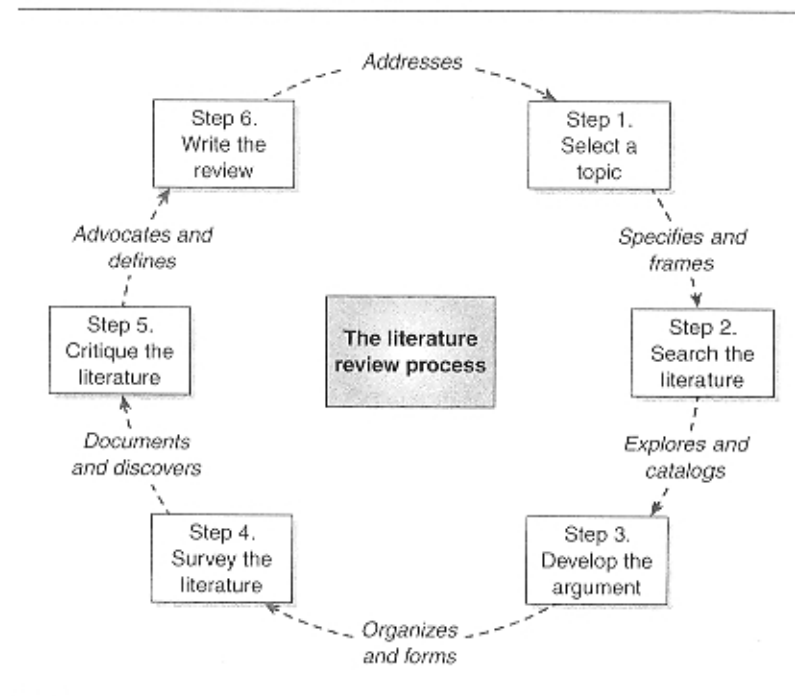
A literature review is an organized way to research the chosen topic. Figure I.3 shows the steps for conducting a literature review.

Writing 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 the six steps:

Step 1. Select a Topic

A successful research topic is usually the result of an interest in a practical problem. That interest must move from everyday language into ideas that form a researchable topic. This topic must be stated as a well-defined question accessible to a specific academic discipline. Specifying the language, refining the focus of the interest, and selecting the academic vantage point are the tasks necessary to create a research topic. The result is a defined topic that provides the direction for Step 2.

Figure I.3 The Literature Review Model



Step 2. Search the Literature

A **literature search** determines what information will be in the review. It does this by winnowing the 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. At this point, you catalog and document the relevant data.

Step 3. Develop the Argument

To argue your thesis successfully, you need to form and then present your case. To form your case, you need to arrange your **claims** logically. To present your 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, synthesizes, and analyzes the data to form the argument about the current knowledge on the topic. The evidence creates a logical and defensible set of conclusions or claims. These conclusions provide the basis for addressing the research question.

Step 5. Critique the Literature

The **literature critique** interprets the current understanding of the topic. It analyzes how previous knowledge answers the research question.

Step 6. Write the Review

Thesis writing transforms the research project into a document for others. Through composing, molding, and refining, the written literature review becomes a work that accurately conveys the research and that can be understood by the intended audience. Thesis writing requires writing, **auditing**, and editing to produce a polished final composition.

The above discussion of the literature review, although condensed, provides a preliminary understanding of what you already know and what you still need to learn about the literature review. The succeeding chapters will describe the specifics for each step and help you to complete each of the tasks necessary for building a strong thesis position and conducting a good review. We turn now to a discussion of fundamentals—**inquiry**, researcher mind-set, and planning.

INQUIRY: THE NECESSARY PRECONDITION

All successful research begins with inquiry. The researcher must have an inquiring mind, natural curiosity, and a fundamental need to learn and discover. The researcher must have an innate awareness of when present knowledge is insufficient and must have an intuitive sense of when something is missing.

- Curiosity creates the sparks that ignite a need to explore what lies beyond the currently known. This fire, in turn, sprouts the

seeds that are the fragile beginnings of the research itself. Inquiring researchers begin their work with questions: “Why? What if . . . ? Is it true?” These questions and others like them are the bedrock of research; without them there is no good research.

- 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. Ideally, personal perspective should have no influence on the researcher’s thinking and no place in the conduct of the research.
- The inquiring researcher comes to the research with an open mind. This researcher is objective, champions no favorites, and has no predetermined conclusions. This researcher is open to seeing all results of the inquiry, has no agenda, and weighs the value of each piece of evidence.
- The inquiring researcher looks at the evidence with a keen eye. This researcher looks for nuances when noting data, constantly looking for connections and patterns in the data. The researcher sees both the trees and the forest.
- The inquiring researcher thinks critically and weighs 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. This inquirer knows that any solid research need many hours of painstaking work. Data identification, collection, cataloging, and documenting need large blocks of time. There are no shortcuts. All good research builds on a thorough investigation of the facts. As any detective knows, successful investigations call for wearing through large quantities of shoe leather.
- The inquiring researcher is deliberate. This researcher acts on a calculated purpose with careful consideration and thoughtful intent. Good research builds on solid thinking and careful execution.
- The inquiring researcher reflects continually. This inquirer advances with skepticism, and questions everything. The research and the researcher are under constant self-scrutiny: “What did I do? What does it mean? How did it work? What

Figure 4.3 Literature Survey Tally Matrix: Stage 1

Stage 1. Assemble the collected data.				
	<i>Key concept or descriptor (1)</i>	<i>Citation or reference (2)</i>	<i>Main ideas (3)</i>	<i>Data quality (4)</i>
	Taken from maps and bibliographic entry card	Taken from maps and bibliographic entry card	Taken from maps and bibliographic entry card	Do data meet quality standards? (yes or no)
Author Text Periodical (A)				
Author Text Periodical (B)				
Author Text Periodical (C)				
Author Text Periodical (n)				