

Considerations in Writing a Literature Review

Contributed by Kathy Black, Ph.D.

Literature reviews are ubiquitous in academic journals, scholarly reports, and social work education. Students taking social work courses throughout the curriculum, including Human Behavior and the Social Environment, Practice, Policy, and Research classes, are frequently asked to write literature reviews for a variety of reasons. Literature reviews are often done within the context of writing a paper and sometimes done as a mini-assignment, perhaps setting the frame for a broader paper, exposing students to the breadth of information available on a topic area, or demonstrating skills in critical thinking and writing ability. However, there are some general guidelines to follow when writing a literature review. This article will briefly outline key points for you to keep in mind when writing literature reviews for social work.

Getting Ready

To begin with, you will need to ascertain the purpose of the literature review. At the very least, be aware of the purpose, scope, and length of the literature review, as well as the writing requirements. This requires clarifying the purpose (Is it to simply overview a broad or specific area of inquiry, or is it expected to be comprehensive or systematic?), scope (How much information is needed—three scholarly sources? Five or 10 sources? Are there any limits to the inquiry? Perhaps a focus on distinct ethnicities or time periods?), and length (Is the final review expected to yield one page or 10 pages of review?). You should also be familiar with required writing styles, such as American Psychological Association (APA), and other expectations, such as double spacing, font size, and so forth. Once purpose, scope, length, and writing expectations are ascertained, you can embark on conducting your search for literature.

The Search

Searching for literature is quite easy these days. Today, much information is available electronically, and you can obtain literature just about anytime and anywhere. To begin the search, take advantage of library resources available to you through your college or university. Libraries often offer group or personalized training in accessing information, and librarians are often available to help on specific topic assignments, as well. If you are a student, you will be exposed to search engines and databases such as Social Work Abstracts and procedures for accessing or requesting books, journal articles, and reports that relate to your topic.

Although information is also widely available through the World Wide Web, not every site offers credible information. You can learn from your library about criteria to evaluate the legitimacy of information. One increasingly popular source of information is Google Scholar (www.google.com/scholar). This site has access to professional journal listings and, sometimes, the articles can be downloaded in full text. In searching for information, you should be aware of key words and advanced search features to facilitate the process. Sources with titles of interest and abstracts can be retrieved on the spot in some cases, marked for subsequent retrieval, and oftentimes downloaded into software such as Refworks or Endnote. Again, you should learn about the resources available to you through your library and take advantage of the high technological services offered by your school.

Once you have identified a number of sources, you must decide whether to retrieve the full text of each. You will soon learn that there may be an astronomical amount of information published in any given subject area, and therefore, refining the search is common. Similarly, it may take you hours to thoroughly explore literature on your topic. Most researchers will find the time spent quite interesting, though. It is exhilarating to be exposed to information and the dynamic process whereby links are availed that can connect you with key authors and related works and other cited references. Though time-consuming, it is generally a satisfying process to search the literature.

Synthesizing Information

After retrieving a given number of references, the critical work of synthesizing the information begins. You should be aware that a literature review is not an annotated bibliography, or a simple write-up of a few statements or so describing the information in each journal article. Likewise, the literature review is not simply a series of paragraphs describing each source separately. A good literature review involves a higher level of integrating the information, yielding a more comprehensive analysis of the content.

You should begin by reading each article and starting to categorize the areas or subtopics that each covers. For example, in doing a literature review about elder abuse, retrieved articles may have focused on different types of abuse, attributes of abused elders, or attributes of perpetrators of abuse to older people. You can largely focus your searching to pre-determine the subtopics in which you will structure your writing. However, that may depend on your previous knowledge of the area and availability of literature on the topic of interest. You should structure the written review with a topic sentence and paragraph highlighting the general importance of the literature, setting the stage for the rest of the review.

Writing should flow and combine the findings of several sources, reinforcing the importance of each subtopic area. Resist simply regurgitating findings by stringing quotes from separate sources; instead, strive to synthesize the information. The following illustrates a common approach to reviewing literature:

In one study, over 900,000 elders were found to have evidence of physical abuse (author, year). Another study reported that "perhaps millions of elders are suffering physical abuse" (author, year, page number). The National

Center for Elder Abuse indicates that there were 6,000 cases of abuse annually including 4,000 physical, 1,500 financial, 400 emotional, and 100 sexual (year).

Instead, synthesize the multiple sources:

Over a million cases of elder abuse were reported to elder abuse hotlines nationally in 2005, and the majority of abuse reported was physical (author, year; author, year; author, year).

Citing research studies requires specific considerations. In your literature review, you should not only emphasize the findings, but also comment on the quality and importance of research presented. For example, what were the limits to the study design? Was it representative? Do the findings support or refute related theories? What gaps remain in the literature?

It is not necessary to cite methodological details of studies, as citations of the source are provided in the review. Readers can refer back to the studies reported in the review should they wish to know more details. The point here is to critically assess the findings in a comprehensive way, and not simply repeat the study's findings. Questions that critically assess the research in your review include attention to research design, sampling, data collection, analysis, and conclusions. Answers to the following questions reflect critical analysis of the literature and demonstrate skills in integrating content on a variety of levels:

What is the research problem addressed in this article? Is the design (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed) appropriate for the question?

What are the variables in this study? How are they operationally defined? Are these definitions sensible and appropriate? What is the population of interest in this study? What is the sampling frame? Are the subjects used in the study representative of the population of interest?

What, if any, are the potential problems with the data collection and analysis procedures used?

Does the research problem apply to diverse groups of people and populations at risk? Were the methods used ethical and sensitive to the inclusion of disenfranchised populations?

What conclusions does the author make on the basis of the study? Does the author discuss implications for social work practice? Are the conclusions and implications reasonable, based on the findings of the study? Why or why not?

Plagiarism

No discussion of writing a literature review is complete without mention of plagiarism. The word "plagiarize" is defined by Merriam-Webster's Dictionary as: "to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own; use (another's production) without crediting the source; to commit literary theft; present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source" (2006).

Plagiarism is a serious offense, and colleges and universities have strict policies to deal with it. In many cases, unintentional plagiarism occurs when students copy verbatim portions of another's work and fail to cite the source of their information. Just to be sure, all factual statements and key ideas should always be credited, and key ideas can almost always be paraphrased. Of course, in all cases, references to the original source of information should be provided. Consult the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, or other appropriate style guide, for the correct procedures for citing and listing references for your literature review.

Unfortunately, other cases of plagiarism involve the intentional and deliberate copying of text that is presented as original work by another. Today, students may be tempted to either "cut and paste" voluminous amounts of information from a variety of sources or even consult sponsors of "prepared papers" in a variety of topic areas. Increasingly, faculty use services such as TurnItIn (www.turnitin.com), which checks papers for evidence of plagiarism. Seriously consider the ethical and academic consequences of plagiarizing material, and avoid the problem altogether by responsibly crafting your own papers and literature reviews.

Students able to effectively search, assess, synthesize, and properly write a literature review are well on the way to receiving a good grade for their efforts. The skill is transferable to students pursuing practice careers and particularly beneficial to students considering master's and doctoral level education.

In all cases, conducting and writing a good literature review is both personally and professionally satisfying, as it advances knowledge—for ourselves and for our readers.

Reference

Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary. (2006). Available: <http://209.161.33.50/dictionary/plagiarize>

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