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Abstract

The importance of literature review in academic writing of different categories, levels, and purposes cannot be over-emphasized. The literature review establishes both the relevance and justifies why new research is relevant. It is through a literature review that a gap would be established, and which the new research would fix. Once the literature review sits properly in the research work, the objectives/research questions naturally fall into their proper perspective. Invariably, other chapters of the research work would be impacted as well. In most instances, scanning through literature also provides you with the need and justification for your research and may also well leave a hint for further research. Literature review in most instances exposes a researcher to the right methodology to use. The literature review is the nucleus of a research work that might when gotten right spotlights a work and can as well derail a research work when done wrongly. This paper seeks to unveil the practical guides to writing a literature review, from purpose, and components to tips. It follows through the exposition of secondary literature. It exposes the challenges in writing a literature review and at the same time recommended tips that when followed will impact the writing of the literature review.

Keywords: Literature, Literature Review, Research, Theoretical, Empirical



Introduction

Every academic writing is usually built on an already existing body of work. A literature review is an account of what has been published on a topic by accredited scholars and researchers. The purpose is to convey to your reader the knowledge and ideas that have been established on a topic, and what their strengths and weaknesses are¹. The navigation of (and through) these works is the main act of literature review. The literature review is the nucleus of any research work at all levels – long essay, dissertation, and thesis. A literature review involves diving into the literature to, interact, review, critique, and establish gaps in already existing work of similar elements. It involves conceptual/historical, theoretical, and empirical interrogation of literature. One significant factor informing the overwhelming significance of literature review is the understanding that research itself is an interactive process, in which investigators build on the work of others² and interact with the existing body of knowledge.

A properly done literature review impacts the entire aspect of the research work. It makes stating a research problem simpler. It will also give a clear direction on the research, as well as the appropriate methodology for use. No researcher can accurately say how much has been said, when, where, and how, unless the person digs into the literature. In fact, with extensive interaction with literature, a greater task of conducting the research – ranging from the problem, objective, questions, and methodology – would have been solved. When a literature review is badly written and faulty, then the research is on its way to total derailment³. Since literature is usually a significant section of academic writing and in most instances, the lengthiest, flawed literature review will make reading research disinteresting.

Review of Literature

This section takes a peculiar style of looking at the associated key concepts in the discourse of literature review. From 'literature' itself to other themes like 'research problems', 'hypothesis' and 'variables'.

Associated Key Concepts

- a. **Literature:** *An existing body of knowledge presented or contained in books, journals, official documents, etc. it is the whole embodiment of resource materials for use in both research and general academic purpose.*
- b. **Research problem:** *The identified issue a researcher seeks to investigate.*

Researchable problems imply the possibility of empirical investigation

1Dena Taylor (2014),The Literature Review: A Few Tips On Conducting It.Retrieved from; <http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/specific-types-of-writing/literature-review>, on 29th of May 2014

2 O'Sullivan, E. and Rassel, G. R. (2016) 2nd edition, Research Methods for Public Administrators, Longman: USA

3Randolph, Justus. "A guide to writing the dissertation literature review." Practical Assessment, Research, and Evaluation 14.1 (2009): 13

- a. *What are the implications of education on voting behavior?*
- b. *What is the relationship between political literacy and political participation?*

Non-researchable problems include explanations of how to do something, vague propositions, and value-based concerns⁴

- c. *Is democracy a good form of government?*
- d. *Should value clarification be taught in public schools?*
- e. *Can crime be prevented?*
- f. *Should physical education classes be dropped from the high school curriculum?*

c. Hypothesis: *This is a statement of the relationship of variables. It is a tentative statement of (un)expected and the unconfirmed relationship between two or more variables⁵, which a research work would validate or falsify. An example of a hypothesis is: "Democracy is more likely in homogenous societies than badly divided ones". Hypotheses are not necessary for all research work. It is a vital element in quantitative research which would involve large statistical data.*

d.

e. Variable: *A variable is any characteristic, number, or quantity that can be measured or counted. A variable may also be called a data item. Age, sex, business income and expenses, country of birth, capital expenditure, class grades, eye color, and vehicle type are examples of variables. It is called a variable because the value may vary between data units in a population, and may change in value over time⁶*

Purpose and Elements of Literature

As already implied, hardly is any phenomenon entirely new, researchers build on an existing body of knowledge. Literature Review is used in research to set the thematic and theoretical pathway for a study. It is usually divided into two main parts – A review of Literature and a Theoretical framework. The review of literature is mainly secondary data appraised, analyzed, critiqued, and integrated into research as the bedrock of primary data to be fused into the study. The second part of the Literature Review which is the Theoretical framework seeks to set the theoretical pathways for a study, appraising appropriate theories, establishing relevance, and constructing an analytical model of the themes under study: in all, establishing research gap and/or new

4 Research Problems, Variables and Hypothesis (2014), Companion website for Education Research, Retrieved from;

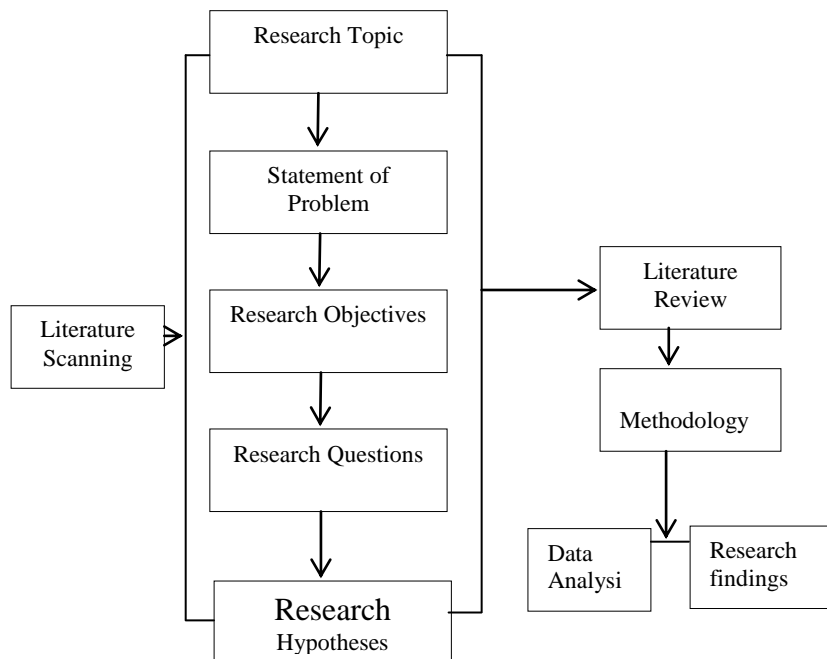
http://wps.ablongman.com/ab_mcmillan_edresearch_4/16/4150/1062474.cw/, on 29th of May 2014

5(Olayinka and Owumi 2006, Singleton and Straits 1999)

6 Australian Bureau of Statistics, (2014), "Statistical Language – what are variables", Retrieved from;

<http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/a3121120.nsf/home/statistical+language+-+what+are+variables>, on 29th of May 2014

thinking in interpreting either known phenomenon or yet to be surmounted challenges. More so, a literature review associates existing themes with the identification of specific research questions⁷.



The understanding in this diagram is that literature review defines and creates the pathway for every other element, part, and method in academic research. Scanning and surveying a range of literature should be the first step before even arriving at a research topic. The variables in your topic must however remain key in the conception of your problem. It should also be noted that a research problem (which includes what has not been done or what could be done in another way) can only be revealed through extensive and utilitarian consumption of literature. The objectives of the research, and by extension the research questions automatically lead to the themes to be reviewed in the literature review session. These go a long way in establishing the research problem. The research objectives and by extension, the questions are bit by bit breakdown of the research problems. Each of the specific objectives/questions in the research would receive the attention of literature as each theme of the literature review. As observed by Cronin, Ryan, and Coughlan, "literature review is central to the research process and can help refine a research

⁷Rowley, Jennifer, and Frances Slack. "Conducting a literature review." *Management research news* (2004).

question through determining inconsistencies in a body of knowledge"⁸. In general, Knopf⁹ outlined the benefits of conducting a literature review as follows:

- It can give you a general overview of a body of research with which you are not familiar.
- It can reveal what has already been done well so that you do not waste time "reinventing the wheel."
- It can give you new ideas you can use in your research.
- It can help you determine where there are problems or flaws in existing research.
- It can enable you to place your research in a larger context so that you can show what new conclusions might result from your research.

In summary, the literature review establishes what has been written, how and why; what has not been written, and what needs to be written, how and why. It also goes to establish if what has been written can be done differently in another way.

Components of Literature

The following are the key components of literature review in academic writing:

a. Introduction

The introduction talks about what the chapter contains. The general breakdown of the chapter applies to academic writing.

b. Literature Review

The literature review is usually of two components – the theoretical literature and the empirical literature. These components are explained as follows:

i. Theoretical literature

What works and authors conceptualized that are usurped as not only foundational but irresistible pathways as far as research of similar elements are concerned.

ii. Empirical Literature

Practical investigations and reviews of tested case studies. For instance, Arendt Lijphart is credited for being the most consistent and comprehensive proponent of the 'power-sharing' theory. The empirical literature would go beyond the theorists and concept builders to the level of consistent scholars in drawing empirical models from any theory. For instance, Adekanye (2007) employed the theory in a variety of African countries¹⁰.

⁸Cronin Patricia, Frances Ryan, and Michael Coughlan. "Undertaking a literature review: a step-by-step approach." *British journal of nursing* 17.1 (2008): 38-43.

⁹Knopf, Jeffrey W. "Doing a literature review." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 39.1 (2006): 127-132.

¹⁰Adekanye, J. 'B. (2007), *Linking Conflict Diagnosis, Conflict Prevention and Conflict Management in Contemporary Africa: Selected Essays*, Lagos: Ababa Press

c. **Theoretical Framework**

Every building starts from a plan. Theory plays the same role in research. "It directs or patterns the trend of discussion and thus makes our argument non-amorphous" (Olayinka and Owumi 2006: 61)

- Appropriate Theories
- Application/Relevant of Theories to Research

d. **Gaps in Literature**

What is key and has not been said and/or other ways to say what had been said. This is to state that gaps in literature might not focus only on what has not been said or covered alone. Most researchers are blinded by the limiting assumption that their work covers a critical aspect that has never been covered by any researcher before. Importantly, gaps in the literature include finding other use as well as a limit on what has been vastly covered. For instance, in a Ph.D. thesis topic, "Social Mobilisation, Critical Citizenry and Democratisation in Nigeria"¹¹, the candidate argued that the gap in the literature was never about the lack or inadequate literature in the subject matter, it established that rich and well-documented research in democratization exists in the literature with the gap being that the expansive body of literature is nearly elevated as a manual to democratisers, undermining the historical realities and critical conjectures peculiar to the African countries under investigation.

Challenges in writing Literature Review

There are common challenges researchers face while writing Literature Review. These include as follows:

- a. **Challenges of accessing relevant materials:** a researcher might usually face the challenge of accessing the relevant materials to determine which are relevant in terms of currency (recency), adequacy, and suitability.
- b. **Identifying which literature is from reliable sources:** A researcher may usually face the challenge of sorting and sieving the literature available to him/her. However, this problem can be solved once a researcher has a mastery of the subject matter as well as the appropriate source(s) for reliable literature.
- c. **Ability to appraise, synthesize and integrate already existing literature into your work:** part of the critical aspect of the literature review is the ability to appraise, synthesize, interrogate and integrate literature. For a literature review to fit adequately into a study and serve its purpose, it must first appraise what has been written in the subject matter by scholars who are masters of the subject matter under the review. That literature is available and of a reliable source does not mean it must be fit for use. The

¹¹Ogbonna. E. C. (2016). Social Mobilisation, Critical Citizenry and Democratisation in Nigeria, A PhD Thesis, Political Science, Babcock University, Ogun State.

researcher might interrogate the literature either to critique it and establish relevance and currency and/or synthesize it to fit into the theme especially when it is based on an explanation of a concept. The existence of abundant and relevant literature might confuse a lazy researcher into lifting and pasting directly to his/her current work.

- d. ***Challenges of not adequately grasping a particular theme of literature or body of work before integrating it into your own:*** a common challenge researchers face, especially when researching in areas that are new to them or they are yet to master the subject matter, is that they might extract and adopt a particular view and expression in a work without properly grasping its depth and varied use. Reading and researching extensively before going into research is the appropriate step to avoid this particular challenge.
- e. ***Delimitation in interrogating the inferences of literature and elevating the same to a currency:*** a researcher must pay attention to a variety of literature that exists in a subject matter, the general contestations, operating milieu, and environment. The beauty of research work is especially pushing the frontiers of knowledge and establishing the chasm in what is already known. Adopting an inference from literature hook line and sinker without interrogating against the provision of other opinions or testing its operability in other environments might derail the capacity and depth of one's research.
- f. ***Properly delineating the existing body of literature and establishing the contours of what is already known, and reporting what is unknown as it applies to your work:*** not properly establishing what is already established in terms of scope and applicability.
- g. ***Challenges of avoiding the temptation of plagiarism when the abundance of the body of literature fits into the current theme under study:*** a research topic that fits exactly into an already existing body of knowledge is problematic in a lot of ways. It could be an easy temptation for the researcher to lift already existing work(s) verbatim. Nonetheless, a research topic or theme that has already made materials that it is neither complimenting nor interrogating is naturally unfit as a research area as the researcher will have no new contribution.

1.2 Tips in improving the writing of Literature Review

- a. Read extensively, exhaustively, and only draw points therefrom. Note the resources that you are deriving your materials from for purposes of referencing when transferring to your work.

- b. Focus on the most recent work and most cited in others to establish currency and relevance¹²
- c. Organize your literature scanning and reading around a specific subject matter relevant to your study. A literature review must be organized around the subject under investigation.
- d. It must synthesize the result of what has been written, identify gaps/controversy and formulate questions for further research.
- e. On citing authors, works quoted verbatim will require the page number of the work within the text. Any quotation of more than four lines should be indented.
- f. In writing your literature review, you are to interrogate literature not report findings. The essence is to find out what has been done, to establish what is yet to be done, or another way to do what has been done.
- g. Sequencing is vital and should be appropriately numbered.
- h. Avoid reference to 'waker pass' authors. Premium is paid to foundational works of theoretical and empirical import.
- i. While paying attention to classical works of theoretical and empirical strands, the currency of literature is important. Attention should be paid to works not older than five years.
- j. Credits must be apportioned appropriately.
- k. A categorical statement must be referenced

Conclusion

The literature review is a significant part of academic writing that could make or mar a research work. This is because it is a comprehensive overview of prior research regarding a specific topic. The essence is to show the reader what is known about a topic, and what is not yet known, thereby setting up the rationale or need for a new investigation, which is what the actual study to which the literature review is attached seeks to do¹³. For research work to remain significant, this important aspect of academic writing must be properly framed, including the technical aspects like referencing.

Recommendations

The article therefore recommends as follows:

1. A proper scanning of literature and reading must precede any research at all. This will enable the researcher to determine what is relevant by having a grasp of the subject matter and the scholars that matters.
2. A researcher can avoid falling into this snare of plagiarism by painstakingly appraising existing work, giving due credit to what fits

¹²Knopf, Jeffrey W. "Doing a literature review." PS: Political Science & Politics 39.1 (2006): 127-132.

¹³Denney, Andrew S., and Richard Tewksbury. "How to write a literature review." Journal of criminal justice education 24.2 (2013): 218-234.

- and matching each opinion against the earlier stand, and/or establishing a gap in what is commonly established in the literature.
3. An opinion found in a literature must not be adopted hook line and sinker. The researcher must subject such to validity by appraising and testing it against the abundance of the writings of others, and/or subject it to critique.
 4. Before going into writing of a particular research work, a researcher must seek competence through intensive study. In fact, literature review should precede the writing of any research work at all with the primary target of making the researcher competent to know what is relevant and what is, whose work is fit for appraisal and which is not.