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# The Literature Review

## Introduction

Although your dissertation has an introductory chapter, the first really major chapter in it is very likely to be the 'Literature Review'. This chapter will require a good deal of preparation in terms of reading and probably, depending on your writing style, a number of drafts, before it is good enough to be included in your final document. This chapter considers the nature of the literature you should use in your dissertation, and indicates how the review should be written and also how to structure it.

## What is literature?

This may seem an easy question to answer. Clearly, there is very large amount of literature that has been produced over time and continues to be produced. Your initial reaction to the question above may be to say something like 'literature is found in books and other printed works and is made up of words'. But it also includes tables, figures, graphs and maps. So you could summarise this as 'anything that is written'. However, there is more than this, because literature also includes radio, TV, film, DVD, and of course the internet, so there is a visual and audio component, which for some types of researcher is very important. So, it is probably better to think of literature as information. Also, literature in relation to your dissertation is information in the public domain. You can therefore find the information in books and other printed material, in libraries, on the radio, TV and film, but also, increasingly, on-line.

## ■ On-line resources

Traditionally, students doing their dissertation would spend a good deal of time in the university library or learning resource centre. This is no longer the case in many countries. Students are more likely to be on-line. Most of the good academic sources for relevant literature, in particular journals, are available on-line and can be accessed remotely. Your university/college will advise you on how to access journals and other library based material, both within the library and remotely.

For many students, the first place they will go to obtain information is the internet. However, you should be very aware of problems and limitations of internet-sourced material. In terms of preparing the dissertation, you are meant to be using predominantly academic sources. The main reason is that academic sources are those that can be trusted to be more reliable than other sources. Before being published in a journal, an article will have been read and reviewed or critiqued by at least two, or possibly three academics, who are experts in the subject matter of the journal article. Many submitted articles do not get published; those that do usually have to be revised. Hence, journal material is the most authoritative that you will be able to access.

Academic books and book chapters may also have been through a similar review process to journal articles, but this does not always occur. Other books may have been through a critical reviewing process, but they may not have been and it is not always possible to tell. International bodies such as the UN and the EU, national governments, government bodies such as ministries, non-government organisations, charities and private organisations produce reports and similar types of publications. These can be authoritative, if based largely on reviewed academic sources. However, if produced by governments, they may be little more than propaganda. Newspapers and magazines do not go through the same review process as academic journals articles, although there is usually some editorial control. TV and film does not have the same review process as books, although, as with newspapers, there is editorial control.

## ■ **How authoritative is the material?**

Remember, anybody can put anything on the internet! Wikipedia is often thought of as an authoritative source of material. It may not be authoritative! The quality depends on who is writing the material. Some of the Wikipedia entries are excellent and of a high standard, others are not. Remember that famous celebrities have often written their own material for Wikipedia and change it when they feel like it! Do not assume that what you read on the internet is accurate or true. Another very important factor is that it is (too) easy to plagiarise from the internet. Simply 'cutting and pasting' can be too tempting for some students. Remember most dissertations have to be submitted through computer software such as 'Turn-it-in'. Those caught cheating (plagiarism is cheating) in this way face very severe penalties, usually meaning they have to re-submit their dissertation, or do another one. In extreme cases of plagiarism, students can be thrown off the course and out of the university!

Below is a summary of major sources of literature for your dissertation with the most authoritative at the top, the least authoritative at the bottom.

- Academic journal articles
- Academic books and edited book chapters
- Non-peer reviewed academic material/other non-academic books
- Popular media (newspapers, magazines, TV, radio, film)
- The internet

## **The rationale for the literature review in your dissertation**

Some students believe (wrongly!) that if they are in the process of discovering something new, then there will be little or no literature that it is relevant to their dissertation topic.

Remember that your dissertation will (hopefully) make two types of contribution: one of these is the practical application of your findings, the other contribution will be the intellectual one. This second one is the contribution to literature. It is this second point that is particularly