SAGE reference

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods

Writing a Literature Review

A literature review (commonly referred to as a lit review) for scholarly research papers is written as a preliminary section immediately preceding the statement of research questions or hypotheses. The main part of the paper prior to a Methods section, a lit review places the study in a larger context by presenting, evaluating, and contextualizing research related to the topic of inquiry. A lit review differs from a review of literature (or a "basic" literature review), which seeks to merely summarize all current knowledge on a topic in order to propose new avenues of research for future scholars. Instead, a research lit review (or "advanced" literature review) incorporates only studies or reports most relevant to the specific study being proposed in the paper. It is how the researchers let the reader know how they got to the point of their own study. With some variations, most research-paper lit reviews are written by including common components. When writing a lit review, these parts are included to address specific reader and researcher goals, are informed by particular ethical and quality standards for which materials to include, and use a standardized style of writing. This entry reviews the purpose and format of a literature review and then highlights several quality, stylistic, and ethical concerns.

Purpose and Format of a Literature Review

Goals and formats of lit reviews differ, but most include an argument or rationale for why the topic should be studied; a paraphrased, integrated coverage of previous literature that has brought the field of research to that current point; and a theory or perspective to guide how and/or why the hypotheses and/or research questions will be examined and interpreted.

Topical Argument or Rationale

Although not often explicitly identified as such, a lit review can be thought of as a persuasive argument to get readers to pay attention, continue reading, and value what the researcher is proposing. A common way to do this is to write using solid arguments supported by credible evidence. A lit review writer is expected to convince the audience that both the overall area (e.g., field or discipline) and the specific topic being studied are valuable to general society, organizational or cultural systems, and/or specific individuals.

Essentially, every source cited in the lit review is shown as a piece of a current-day knowledge puzzle, with a defined hole to be filled by a missing piece (i.e., the proposed study). Therefore, to some extent, this part of a lit review and the following (presentation of other works) are largely *epistemological* because they show the reader what is or is not information —or what counts as knowledge. The lit review also is written in a way that is *axiological* because it convinces the reader what topics or previous knowledge are worth knowing and knowing more about.

Seminal and Currently Relevant Research

A well-written lit review will help an audience understand how and where the subsequently proposed study fits into the larger scheme of knowledge as currently understood in a particular field. The lit review, and particularly its presentation of previous literature, is how the researcher shows that he or she is up to date and understands the field of study. It also is where the writer demonstrates convincingly that his or her study fits into the next piece of the broader knowledge puzzle. Both contributions and limitations of previous works are discussed and assessed in this section; this allows the reader to see from whence the current study has

been drawn and where or how it will address existing problems in the field. Thus, when writing a lit review, other articles should not merely be described in a reporting style. Instead, the writer should evaluate those works for the purpose of advancing the state of knowledge.

Theoretical Background or Lens

Just as the purpose of a theory or paradigm is to help readers understand particular phenomena, lit reviews—which present these ideas—are the section for researchers to show how their work is grounded in a particular way of thinking and to demonstrate that their framework is a credible, systematic way to describe, explain, and/or predict the findings of their study. Although not every lit review incorporates an explicit theory or paradigm, most scholars write them in such a way as to reveal their foundation, approach to, or lens through which they will integrate the current study's findings. A thorough, clear lit review helps the reader understand why a particular aspect of the topic, as opposed to a different focus, is presently studied.

Quality, Stylistic, and Ethical Concerns

To evaluate the quality of a lit review, and thus by association the credibility of the study and its researchers, there are some common writing standards applied to research papers. Lit reviews in the field of communication typically include detailed examination and integration of the chosen sources. Furthermore, the manner in which the researcher writes or implements those sources can reveal a lot about the potential biases or worldview of the author. Clearly, some of these considerations can be somewhat subjective. Nonetheless, overarching accepted standards across many types of research demonstrate some common misconceptions that quickly distinguish the novice from the experienced lit review writer.

Quality of Source Materials

In a formal research paper, "good" sources are usually those that are scholarly. This means that the writer, to increase credibility, will largely avoid using popular press or unpublished works to support his or her arguments or rationale. Next, a quality writer will emphasize peer-reviewed sources. Being subject to critique by expert researchers before being published provides the material with its own layer of validity that the author can harness for his or her own quality argument. Third, primary sources are essential. Accuracy can be verified by using only works that report directly from the persons who conducted the research. The thorough lit review writer will make sure he or she has read the work before using it; in doing so, he or she makes sure to avoid plagiarism and misquoting or misattributing ideas. Finally, when choosing which sources to include, a focused writer prioritizes sources specifically related to his or her topic of study. Unless a topic is new to the field, tangentially related sources are not typically incorporated in a lit review.

The lit review writer should expect that his or her statements, arguments, and supporting citations will be checked for corroboration by others, especially when the proposed study is new or controversial. To allay readers' concerns, the writer demonstrates support by using a variety (i.e., not all by the same author or school of research) of authors and publications; once again, exceptions to this include lit reviews for studies that challenge the status quo or are new or cutting edge. Initially, to establish a thorough background on the topic, the original creators of a theory or authors of a finding that guides the field are incorporated. Otherwise, the most recent knowledge on a topic is shown by citing works that are current at the time the

study is written.

Stylistic Trends

Language and Grammar

In research that follows the *American Psychological Association Publication Manual* (APA style manual), lit reviews are expected to focus on paraphrasing, as opposed to directly quoting, other sources as much as possible. Whenever possible, the lit review should be the words (if not always the grammatical first-person voice) of the writer, supported by parenthetical citations to source the ideas of other authors. Three writing tenses (and personas) may be used in the lit review, depending on its purpose in the paper: present tense and first person when referring to the present study's proposals or hypotheses; past tense and third person (even when using personal works) when referring to any research or theory already published; and future tense and first or third person when talking about what needs to yet occur in the field or what will be reported in the paper itself. An example is provided below:

> In this literature review, I will discuss [first-person present] the results found by Johnson and colleagues, who discovered [third-person past] . . . Combined, literature to date suggests [third-person present] . . . Thus, I proposed [first-person past] the following research question to guide [present] the current study.

Organization

Differing from a review of literature, in which myriad organizational approaches to presenting sources are common (e.g., chronological, thematic, cause–effect, problem–solution), a research lit review focuses more on an inverse pyramid structure whereby broader background themes, topics, and trends are discussed first to form a foundation for specific literature that directly relates to the detailed study presented. For example, lit reviews are typically written to first define key terms (where relevant) and begin making a case (i.e., rationale) for studying the topic. Subsequently, each section or subsection in a lit review covers what is known to date and how that shows readers the need for further study, all along providing evidence of how the research questions and/or hypotheses the author proposes are necessary and valuable.

Novice writers of lit reviews can be identified by a failure to appropriately embed sources within their larger arguments. In other words, they let the literature drive their writing rather than fitting the material to the study's focus. Writers who simply summarize articles one-by-one, author-by-author, list facts or findings, or write paper versions of annotated bibliographies are not creating a lit review. Instead, writers should view the lit review as an opportunity to tell a story (with the highs, lows, arches, and conclusions of a good narrative) that foregrounds their proposed study.

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See also Authoring: Telling a Research Story; Ethics Codes and Guidelines; Literature Review, The; Literature Reviews, Resources for; Literature Reviews, Strategies for; Research, Inspiration for; Writing Process, The

Further Readings

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