



Book of the Month 03: Books on the Literature Review

Conducting original research requires mastering one's field; one must know what knowledge already exists and what opportunities for new work are available. In a thesis (or dissertation), the *literature review* demonstrates mastery by showing that the author understands the major ideas in the field and has examined all the written works relevant to his or her research question. The review shouldn't merely sum up content—like a multi-title book report. Rather, it must evaluate the current state of the literature for strengths, weaknesses, contradictions, and gaps. It must establish that the thesis breaks new ground by advancing a major idea, challenging an inadequate idea, resolving contradictory evidence, filling a gap, or otherwise creating significant new knowledge. Thus, conducting the review and formulating the research question are closely related. Ultimately, the review justifies the thesis.

The literature review is typically organized by theme, not source. It has no standard length. The research question establishes the boundaries of the research and, likewise, bounds the field relevant to the question. The review must be thorough within those bounds. Its scope is typically confined to published academic, peer-reviewed sources; however, any materials used as a foundation for the thesis—e.g. government documents, private correspondence with experts, etc.—must be discussed. Unpublished sources, like theses and dissertations, are also considered. Of note, the review does not present new work or findings; those belong in the body of the thesis.

Despite its hallowed place in academia, the literature review as a formal methodology is a new development. The first full book on the subject was Chris Hart's *Doing a Literature Review: Releasing the Social Science Research Imagination* (1998). Aimed at postgraduate students and new researchers, the text examines the wide-ranging skills required to construct a quality review. These start with research skills: the ability to find, document, organize, and, most important, evaluate the relevant literature. They end with writing skills: the ability to organize material thematically, describe it accurately, and argue in support of the evaluation. Hart's book includes lengthy examples and would make an excellent guide for an NPS student starting a thesis.

While the literature review typically supports a larger work, an authoritative and thorough assessment of the current state of a field can be an end in itself. Literature reviews, therefore, are sometimes produced as standalone works—journal articles or even class papers. These standalones are the focus of Jose L. Galvan's *Writing Literature Reviews: A Guide for Students of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (1999). There is a significant difference between component and standalone reviews. Whereas the component review dovetails with the author's research question, the standalone review simply evaluates the state of the knowledge in a given field. Despite this difference, the skills required to produce the review are largely the same, which gives Galvan's book a large overlap with Hart's. Of particular value, Galvan provides nine examples of literature reviews, two to nine pages in length, complete with text, graphs, tables, and citations.

Several other books, as well as academic articles, cover the art of the literature review. It may be a new field of methodology, but it's flourishing. When applied to a specific discipline, the books tend to address the social sciences, as do the above two examples. Thus, there are significant gaps in the study

of the literature review. To close with a self-reflexive thought, there now exists the opportunity to compose a literature review on the field of literature reviews.

Chris Hart

Doing a Literature Review: Releasing the Social Science Research Imagination

London: Sage Publications, 2008

978-0761959755

Jose L. Galvan

Writing Literature Reviews: A Guide for Students of the Social and Behavioral Sciences

Glendale, CA: Pyczak Publishing, 2013

978-1936523030