Literature reviews:

Purpose of the review

The literature review is a preliminary exploration of a topic prior to carrying out a research project and is an ongoing process throughout your research. It should be comprehensive and demonstrate that you have read widely and have a deep understanding of your chosen topic.

Not all literature reviews are undertaken at the beginning of a study, however, and it is important that you follow your chosen research method carefully to ensure you undertake your review at the correct time in the process.

The aims of the literature review are:

- To demonstrate why a new research study is necessary by providing a critical account of the existing literature.
- To identify, summarise, synthesize and analyse all high quality research relevant to the question (but which does not necessarily support your argument).
- To identify the key writers, theories, hypotheses relating to your question and to indicate where the weaknesses and gaps are, contrast the views of particular authors, raise questions or identify the main areas of controversy or agreement.
- To demonstrate an in-depth understanding of your topic area, including key concepts, terminology, theories and definitions.

Tips!

- Search methods should be explicit and systematic with the aim of producing reliable results which are repeatable, auditable and transparent. This is particularly relevant in the health fields although the search should be carried out in a systematic and methodical way whatever the discipline.
- You should take a thematic approach and organise your review around ideas rather than the sources themselves so that key themes and trends emerge. As such, a holistic approach should be adopted whereby the literature is viewed as a whole rather than in isolation.
- You may find that your literature review becomes more like a work in progress rather than a finished chapter. You may write an initial draft, put it to one side, and come back to it later as the focus of your project shifts, or if you discover new research.
You may end up re-structuring your literature review a number of times, and it is likely that you will need to do a thorough re-draft at the end before you submit.

A literature review is NOT:

- The primary importance of a literature review is not to justify or argue why you think your research is so important, although you should still state the primary purpose of your research.

- A descriptive list or summary of everything you have read on the topic, such as books and journals with no attempt to look at the relationships between the views, or draw out themes.

- A chronological description of what you have discovered in your field.

- An exhaustive bibliography on everything ever written on the topic – you need to be critical decide what to include and what to exclude.