Literature reviews:
Reading for your literature review

Once you have thought about the topics you need to cover and have embarked on some preliminary literature searching, you should start thinking about setting down some draft subject headings to help you structure your literature review.

- For each heading try to select a few key texts to read first - three is ideal to start with although you may find that you may eventually be writing about the same text under different headings, so bear that in mind when you are reading and making notes.

- **Tip!** Taking a little extra time with note-making will save you time and trouble later. Make sure that you always write the details of the text at the top of your page of notes, adding page numbers against your notes as you write them, so you can find your place again if necessary.

- When you have finished reading your chosen texts, summarise and comment on what you have read, making sure that you demonstrate how it is relevant to your research. Then look to see what you need to discuss further and do more reading to enable you to fill any gaps.

**Knowing when to stop reading**

- Be guided by how long your literature review needs to be – if it is only 1000 words long then there is no point reading exhaustively.

- Work out how long you will spend reading and then plan backwards from your deadline and decide when you will need to move on to other parts of your research e.g. data collection.

- It is essential to show you have read the major and important texts in your topic, and that you have also explored the most up-to-date research.

- **TIP!** An easy way to identify the seminal or standard texts in your field is to check reference lists of articles on similar topics to see which texts are frequently cited. You can also use a citation index such as Web of Science.

- Once you get to the point where you keep coming across very similar viewpoints and you find your reading is no longer providing new information, this is a sign you have reached saturation point and should probably stop.
● Keep referring back to your research question. Keep asking yourself how this relates to your investigation? Avoid branching off and straying into unrelated areas and ensure you stay focussed on your topic.

● If you are doing a PhD, or a longer term research project, you will need to make a conscious decision to switch focus from literature searching to gathering data. Your literature review should inform and steer your research design and objectives and once you get to a certain point you should have the confidence to switch from reviewing literature to collecting data.

● It is normal to do a draft of the literature review then put it to one side to return to later in your project as it may need updating with new literature that you subsequently find.

Types of literature to include

When writing a literature review, it is crucial to distinguish between

● Theoretical literature - scholarly writing that helps you to build and sharpen your conceptual focus. Look at the evidence upon which it is based and the claims which it makes and judge whether the theory is sound.

● Contextual or related literature - articles and books that are closely related to your area or subject of research. This literature may consist of research studies, reviews of research, practice literature written by practitioners about their specialist field and policy literature which tells practitioners or professionals how to act.

Making this distinction is important because you will need to read closely every work that forms part of your core theoretical framework, but can often do a quicker read of those articles that are part of your background literature. It is important to understand the types of literature you find in order to make sense of it and be able to compare it with other literature you find.