Literature reviews:

Structuring your literature review

Every literature review is different and how you structure your review will depend on the type of project/research you are doing and what subject you are studying. You may need to seek guidance from your supervisor before you begin your review, for example to check how far back in time you should go and how many sources you are expected to include.

The introduction

This explains the broad context of your research area and the main topics you are investigating. It briefly highlights the relevant issues or debates that have characterised your field of research. It may include the following:

- Why your topic is important – is it an area of current interest?
- Has the topic already been widely researched?
- Are there any significant gaps in the research?
- Any debates or controversy about the topic, or whether there is a consensus?
- The scope of the review and what aspects of the topic are you going to cover?
- How is the review organised - e.g. chronologically, thematically or methodologically?

Ask yourself the following questions after you have written the introduction:

- Can you tell what structure the literature review will take?
- Is it clear how the literature review relates to the dissertation?
- Is it clear why the literature review topic is important?
- Does the introduction provide signposting for the reader and explain the scope of the study, organisation and the sequence of topics

The main body of your review

This should be an analysis of the literature according to a number of themes or topics that overlap with your research and may have headings. You can write your literature review one section at a time, but ensure that these flow and tell a coherent "story". You should demonstrate how your research builds on what has been done before and you should justify what you are doing, why you are doing it and how you are going to do it.

There are several common structures that are used when writing the main body of your literature review. Sometimes it is appropriate to use more than one of these structures and you may need to check with your supervisor which structure(s) would be most appropriate for you.
• **Chronological** – Here you may wish to group together and discuss sources according to when they were published. This can be useful if you want to highlight changes and developments in a research field over time. You will still need to write critically, however, if you opt for this structure.

• **Thematic** – here you may want to group together research into key themes or debates. Your discussion will be organised around these themes or debates.

• **Methodological or theoretical** – here the focus will be on the different methods used to study the topic or different theoretical viewpoints.

Once you have decided on the structure you can develop headings and subheadings. These are useful in helping to group the relevant research into themes or topics. This gives a focus to your analysis, as you can group similar studies together and compare and contrast their approaches, any weaknesses or strengths in their methods, and their findings.

**Referring back to your literature review in your discussion section**

Your literature review has two main purposes:

1. To place your investigation in the context of previous research and justify how you have approached your investigation.

2. To provide evidence to help explain the findings of your investigation

It is important that you relate the discussion of your findings back to the background literature. Do your results confirm what was found before, or challenge it? Why might this be?

The following example is based on study advice by the University of Reading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finding</th>
<th>95% of the students you surveyed have problems managing their time at university.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do you think about this?</td>
<td>I expected it to be less than that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What makes you think that?</td>
<td>Research I read for my literature survey was putting the figure at 60-70%.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What conclusions can you draw from this?</td>
<td>There must be reasons why the figures are so different. The sample I surveyed included a large number of mature students, unlike the samples in the previous research. That was because the brief was to look at time management in a particular</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
department which had a high intake of post-experience students.

The percentage of students surveyed who experienced problems with time management was much higher at 95% than the 60% reported in Jones (2006: 33) or the 70% reported in Smith (2007a: 17). This may be due to the large number of mature students recruited to this post-experience course. Taylor (2004: 16-21) has described the additional time commitments reported by students with young families, and the impact these may have on effective management of study time. The department recognises this, offering flexible seminar times. However it may be that students would benefit from more advice in this area.

When writing your discussion section, you may find that you need to redraft the focus of your literature review slightly to draw out those studies that are most important to your findings. You can always remove studies that are less relevant and add others that turned out to be more significant than you initially thought.

The relationship between the literature review and the discussion section can be compared to an hour-glass by starting broad and then narrowing down to explain how previous research has influenced your specific investigation. The discussion should start by analysing your results and end by explaining what they mean for the outcome of your study. It should end by widening out to assess how these results might contribute to your field of research as a whole.

Conclusion

- This should summarise the research which you have evaluated in the main body of your review and link it to your own research.
- Your conclusion should identify any gaps or problems with the existing research and explain how your investigation is going to address these gaps and build on the existing research.
- You should be able to argue convincingly that your research will be important in furthering knowledge in your specialist field.