# LITERATURE REVIEWS

**This supplement, created by the ALC, should be read in conjunction with the guidelines in specific Course Profiles and Course Moodle sites.**

# Contents

# Literature reviews

A literature review is a review of the literature (written information) on a specific topic. A literature review can be required as part of a report or essay or it can be set as a complete assignment. The review requires you to:

- collect information and summarise it
- examine and evaluate the information in terms of its strengths and weaknesses
- compare the different sources and organise your review around focus points.

A literature review is a task that you should really undertake for any assignment as it is important to have carefully selected resources to support your ideas. When you are asked to complete a formal literature review either on its own or as a section in a larger assignment, you will not always be given a set of specific questions to answer. Sometimes you may simply be given a general topic (for example, 'Strategic Human Resource Management', 'Brand Personality' or 'Internet Hacking') and be asked to complete a literature review.

## How to approach a literature review - useful techniques

There is no set way of beginning a literature review. It is simply a matter of researching, then making, evaluating and organising notes in order to decide how best to present the information. It is essential that you understand what each source has to say about a topic. This will enable you to compare and contrast the information so that you can categorise the literature according to key issues and viewpoints.

The key to a doing a literature review is to take it step-by-step and work on it over time **(it cannot be done overnight so start early!!!).** It is important to keep two basic principles in mind when completing the review. **Firstly, read with a purpose**. Look for the major concepts, conclusions, theories and arguments that underlie the literature source and look for similarities and differences with closely related works. **Secondly, write with a purpose**. the aim should be to evaluate and show relationships between literature sources. It takes time to research, read, evaluate and take notes, so give yourself plenty of time and use the six steps outlined below.

## STEP 1: Analyse the task

Read through your assessment task (in the course profile/Moodle). Make notes of the general topic and any key issues/questions you may be asked to address. Use this to write a list of keywords you can use for your article search.

## STEP 2: Search for information

Start searching for relevant information. When searching for information, be sure that you collect the appropriate kind of sources. In some cases you will be restricted to using only academic journal articles, whereas in others, you may have to use a combination of academic, practitioner, empirical and theoretical articles. Always check your course profile. If you need assistance in finding articles through the databases, you are advised to make an appointment with the library staff.

**WARNING: Your review should focus on published materials so when doing a literature review, be very careful about searching the World Wide Web as you may come across information that is inappropriate. Always start by searching for articles in the online databases.**

## STEP 3: Read critically and efficiently

Skim-read texts. Read the abstract, introduction, findings and conclusion. Evaluate the source for relevancy – author's credentials, date of publication, type of publication and bibliography. Make notes of any common themes/issues/ideas that present themselves. This will be useful later when you come to note taking.

## STEP 4: Develop focus points

Develop a set of guide questions/general points that need to be considered in relation to your topic. These may come directly from your course profile or they may be a more specific set of key issues/questions/points based on your first reading of the materials. You may have a set of key questions about the topic already in mind, but you may wish to add common ideas/discussion points you have noticed from your reading. (Note the first row of table 1.0).

## STEP 5: Second read for detail and make summary notes

The next step is to start making notes of key ideas from each source for analysis and evaluation. At this stage it is important to:

- Thoroughly read through each source one at a time and make notes.

- Do this in simple bullet-point format.

- Avoid re-writing large paragraphs from the text.

- Put it into your own words.

- Stay focused on the question or issue you are trying to deal with.

- Once you have read an article, put it aside and ask yourself: 'What was its main viewpoint/response in relation to that question/issue?'

As sources are read for detail, critically analyse the content to understand the following:

- Arguments/points of view – are they logical

- Findings and evidence to support each finding

- Reliability and accuracy of information

- Limitations and weaknesses

When you have taken note of that source's views on that issue - consider the next one. If that source does not deal with that issue, continue and move on to the next one until you have considered each source. Make sure that with each set of notes, you write the full referencing details (as you would use for a reference list) either at the top of the page/section or, if you are using a research table, in the first column (see Table 1).

Although there is no set format for taking notes it is really a matter of what suits you. Ensure notes are organised and address key issues and themes. A suggestion would be to use a table to organise your notes (see table 1.0), or save to computer files. Don't just cut and paste information to a file as it is the critical analysis and note-making that is essential to produce a competent literature review.

**Table 1: Research table using the topic of nuclear power as an example**

| Source | Who | Issue Position | Reasoning | Evidence | Strengths & Weaknesses |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rif 2002 – *include complete reference* | J. Rif (Australian Historian) | **Neutral?** Historical overview | Understanding the past helps prevent mistakes now | Gives history of nuclear power including origins, military uses and accidents | A good overview but does not discuss role in global warming |
| Collin 2001 - *include complete reference* | 1. R. Collin (nuclear scientist) 2. L. Lake (biologist) | **For** Nuclear power | Better for environment 1. does not add to global warming 2. less water pollution | Cites research on ozone layer by Philips 1990 | Evidence is old & Lake works in nuclear industry so probably biased |
| Li 2004 *include complete reference* | S. Li & R. Jones (politicians) | | It is good for the nation because we could sell uranium and make more money | List nations that would buy and statistics of billions of export dollars | Reasoning does not support position. $billions does not mean it's good for Aust. What are social-environmental costs? Also, we already make $ selling coal. |
| Black 2006 *include complete reference* | P. Black (University scientist) | **Against** nuclear power | Environmental Hazard - Nuclear waste will threaten environment for 1,000s of years | Cites extensive research over 20 years from US, UK, Aust., France | Strong evidence - it has many studies done by top researchers over 20 years. But will science solve this? |
| Wong 2003 *include complete reference* | L. Wong – (Greens politician) | | Stations can be used to get material to create nuclear weapons | Gives cases where terrorists have tried to get nuclear material | Scary - good reasoning, but evidence is weak as it is based on newspaper stories not academic research |

## STEP 6: Compare and Evaluate

Once you have completed the note-taking process you then need to evaluate the information. When evaluating the information, take note of the following points:

- What is the main message(s) this source is trying to communicate? = the key argument.

- Why has the author(s) taken this viewpoint?

- Who agrees (has similar views)?

- Who disagrees (has quite different views)?

- How credible/valid is this source?

- How/where can I use this information?

## **STEP 7: Collate and develop essay/report plan**

Once you have collected, compared and evaluated your information, you are in a position to start organising ideas and begin developing a plan. As with any assignment, it will need to be written in paragraphs, so ideally you should organise your information according to key ideas and then present the major viewpoint(s) in relation to each of those ideas. Be aware that when presenting the information, the same source may be referred to in different sections as it becomes relevant. Remember the task is not so much about presenting individual article critiques as it is about presenting the key themes/points of discussion you have found and how the viewpoints fit together in relation to each of these. The way you structure/present this information will depend upon the task requirements and the information you have gathered.

*Formatting for literature review tasks can vary. For examples of literature reviews, please ask an ALC advisor or access the online ALC Moodle site.*

## Literature review checklist

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. Have you used the required number of resources? | ❏ |
| 2. Have you used the correct type of resources (academic journal articles, practitioner journal articles)? | ❏ |
| 3. Have you summarised the key viewpoint of each article? | ❏ |
| 4. Have you compared/contrasted sources with one another? | ❏ |
| 5. Have you considered the validity of each source (reliability of the author, age, extent of supporting research/evidence)? | ❏ |
| 6. Have you grouped your resources according to commonality of themes/ideas? | ❏ |
| 7. Have you been sure to include analysis and critique in your discussion *not* just description and summary? | ❏ |
| 8. Have you referenced all resources correctly (in-text)? | ❏ |
| 9. Have you listed all sources in a reference list? | ❏ |
| 10. Does your reference list include only sources you have discussed and referenced in the body of your assignment? | ❏ |
| 11. Have you written in complete, logically ordered paragraphs? | ❏ |

**Make sure you print a copy of the assignment**

**before submitting it!**