LITERATURE REVIEWS 101
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What is a literature review?
According to the Royal Literary Fund, a literature review has four main objectives:

- *Survey* the research in a given field
- *Synthesize* that information
- *Extract* the key components
- *Critically analyze* the information presented.

This is done by: looking at gaps in the research, limitations placed upon the researchers, finding new relationships among the data and discusses areas where further research could be conducted.

Literature reviews are not meant to find answers to every question, in fact it’s quite the opposite. By addressing gaps in the research, and building upon the previous knowledge, researchers are acknowledging that we cannot know everything.

As well, there is the issue that if a person attempts to take one single article for face value, they may end up with an extremely skewed image of the subject presented. However, that can be avoided by doing a literature review; literature reviews take dozens of articles and attempt to find relationships and patterns between those articles to create a more cohesive image.

Formulating a research question

How do I come up with a research question?
Arguably one of the most important aspects of a literature review is having a solid research question. However, before you can even formulate an actual question, it is best to start by doing preliminary research. You want to make sure that you are devising a research question in a field where there is actually research to be found. If your topic is ultra-specific and you can only find four articles, that will not benefit you in writing a full literature review (which typically has 10-15 articles as sources). If that is something you encounter, you may want to consider broadening your question or looking for a different subject matter.
Devising a question:
Your research question will be the basis of all your research and guides the literature review.

There are a few key things you should remember while devising a question:
1. All literature reviews should answer a question.
2. Choose a question that can be attainably answered.
   - Remember you are one individual. Do not expect to answer or evaluate the long-term effects of a new drug trial on treating cancer patients.
3. Choose a question that pertains to your interests
   - You are about to spend a semester (or longer) on this topic. Choose something that you will not get bored of and want to learn more about.

My professor told me my research question is too “broad”. How do I fix it?
Your question is: “How does depression affect people”.

The first is thing you want to consider is the word “affect”.
“Affect” is too broad of a word to use because:
- The reader will be unsure of what you are actually referring to when you say the word “affect”.
  “Affect” is a vague word as there a variety of issues you could be referencing.
- Start by asking yourself what are possible affects you could be looking at. Do we want to look at the effects on daily life? Social interactions? School work? Self-Image? Choose which ones you want to look at and integrate them into your question.

An example of how this would look with a newly redefined area of focus is now:
“How does depression affect the quality of work and social relations in people?”

The next issue that arises in your question is the demographic you are looking at. You want to make sure your research question has a specific group in my mind—think on the basis of sex, age, or income level. By doing so, you are not applying generalizations to an entire population, and it allows you to be more specific.

Once you establish the group you want your research to focus on, your question could now be:

“To what extent does depression affect the quality of school work and social relations in college aged individuals?”

You now have a question that is:
1. specific
2. provides guidance for further research
3. is in a field where there is plenty of current research to be found.
Finding sources

Finding good sources is arguably one of the most important things to your success in writing your literature review. Without solid sources that actually pertain to your topic, you will find writing your review to be a difficult task.

The first thing you want to start with are databases. Regular old Google will not do the job, as it does not filter for the type of sources you will need. All literature reviews use scholarly, or peer reviewed articles as their primary sources. You can find these types of sources through accessing, Google Scholar, UNR Mathewson-IGT Knowledge Center Database, or Pub Med to begin your search.

For a fully comprehensive resource on databases and how to best utilize them, see the UWSC resource Utilizing Online Databases.

How do I figure out what a good resource is?
There is unfortunately no magic trick in finding good sources for a literature review. It takes time and patience to find articles that will help in answering your research question.

However, here are some tips that help in making your search easier:

Chose recent articles.
The more recent the better. A general rule of thumb is to look within a ten-year window—however that can easily change based upon the subject of your review. For example, if you are looking at the benefits of organic farming practices, you are better off choosing an article from 2012, versus 1995, as more recent articles will be a better reflection of the field currently.

Read the abstracts.
Abstracts are the SparkNotes of a journal article. They are beneficial in that that give you a rough idea of what the article is about. However, be careful with going strictly off abstracts as they do not tell you all the important findings in an article. They are best used when you are in the initial stages of your research and you are trying to gather articles to see where you should take your research.
Read the discussion section.
The discussion section is where you will find analysis about the findings of the research. It will help you establish whether or not this article will work as one your sources to for your literature review. Going through the discussion gives you the implications of the research; telling you the reader why it was important that the researchers did x, y and z.

IMPORTANT NOTE:
These suggestions are meant to make your life easier when you are in the preliminary stages of research. However, once you start writing the actual literature review it is crucial that you read the entire article to have a complete understanding of what is going on in the research.

What are the different types of research?
Types of research you can look at:
1. Systematic reviews and published literature reviews
2. Quantitative research
3. Qualitative research

Systematic reviews are often known as literature reviews, something that you will be undertaking. Typically, individuals who are publishing literature reviews are in a team of research and have considerably more time and man power than you do. Their reports include dozens of studies and help corroborate the findings of all the articles that they are looking at.

Quantitative research typically describes randomized control trials; studies that distance the researcher from the participant and focus primarily on the number and data sets yielded from the study.

Qualitative research is composed of cohort studies, case control (both are forms of observational studies). The main goal of this form of research is to look at the relationships among variables and the causations of them.

It is important to know what type of research studies you want to look at, as the research methods of every article do not provide a one size fits all approach for all literature reviews. As you conduct your research, depending on your topic you will often see a trend to begin to emerge of what type of study is common for that particular subject matter.