

Editorial

Literature Review—The Springboard for Research

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“What do researchers know? What do they not know? What has been researched and what has not been researched? Is the research reliable and trustworthy? Where are the gaps in the knowledge? When you compile all that together, you have yourself a literature review.”

—Jim Ollhoff, *How to Write a Literature Review*

Literally speaking, the springboard is a flexible platform used by divers and gymnasts to gain added impetus when performing a dive, jump higher or do gymnastics. In research, the literature review is comparable to the springboard which denotes the beginning from which an enterprise, activity or research is launched. It is the flexibility of the springboard which launches the person higher, and in research, the literature review broadens the perspective of the researcher giving more clarity to direction he/she should be working upon. Reviewing the literature is a time-consuming preparatory home work which acts as a catalyst for future research. It may be an end in itself if it is analysed and published as a review, or it can be used as a prerequisite to formulate a research problem.¹ It provides foundation of knowledge on the topic and gives you the confidence to place your research work within the context of existing research.

Significance and Purpose of Literature Review

- To identify the need and justify your research and convince the reader about what you are doing is important and needs to be done.
- Going through the published works enlightens the novice researchers about the topic to be taken up for research; that is, the problem statement is refined.
- To prevent duplication or incidental plagiarism when you have conducted some research and at time of publishing, you learn that it has already been published; all the money, effort and human resource may go waste. At the same time, people will be suspicious about the authenticity of your research.

- If a similar research has already been done which can only be discovered by literature review, you can tailor or tweak your research.
- It helps shape your research in a direction you may not have thought of by offering insights and different perspectives on research topic.
- To compare previous findings and critique with existing findings and suggest further studies.²
- It helps determine what is and what is not within the scope of proposed research.
- It enables the author to differentiate what has been learnt and accomplished and what still needs to be learnt and accomplished.
- Researchers can also study and utilise the published works to gain knowledge about various aspects of protocol designing, such as study design, sampling methods, statistical methods, ethical issues, etc. These can be reproduced in the new study while giving due importance to the originality and referencing.
- It helps carry out SWOT (strengths-weaknesses-opportunities-threats) analysis of a research project. It exposes the strengths and weaknesses of previous studies and enables you to fill those gaps and conflicts in your research. It also underlines the opportunities open to your research or the threats faced by your research project.
- Further, the published research findings can be evolved by advancing to the next level of evidence in subsequent studies (e.g., meta-analyses and systemic reviews).
- A new study can also be a re-verification study (e.g., reproving of homoeopathic medicines), improved study design of a previous study, cost-effectiveness study or implementation research study that is a medium to incorporate research outcomes into clinical practice.

How to Conduct Literature Review

Technical skills are required to produce robust literature review of highest standard. The comprehensive literature reviews examine the literature with a lens defined by research objectives. It should be like ‘telling a story’ by critically analysing the literature and arriving at specific conclusions about it. With the strengths and weaknesses of a topic exposed,

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authors can synthesise knowledge on the topic by reviewing the threads of research together, producing a conceptual framework, a new model.²

The sources of published studies that can be consulted for the literature review include journal articles, indexed databases, thesis, patents, books, etc. To use the information and knowledge from these sources, there are various methods for citation such as quoting, paraphrasing and summarising. The researchers should be vigilant in utilising the published works with appropriate acknowledgement and referencing of the original work.

Criteria

Literature review should meet the following three criteria.³

- To present results of similar studies.
- To relate the present study to the ongoing dialogue in the literature.

- To provide the framework for comparing a study results with other studies' results.

To conclude, literature review is a very complex task that requires the integration and application of a variety of skills and knowledge that only few can master.² A good literature review guarantees neither a rigorous study nor a significant research outcome, but it is unlikely that one can do a quality research without a thorough insight of the subject.

References

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