Doing a Literature Review

Introduction

An excellent research project hinges on a good research question, and a good research question requires you to be familiar with previous research and theories. This is why one of the initial tasks associated with a dissertation, a final-year project and other similar research-focused activities is conducting a literature review of previously published work. Typically this would follow on from you having already gained some familiarity with an area from an appropriate textbook where they are available.

Literature reviews usually happen at three key points in a project:

- during the development of your research question;
- during the planning stages, as you work out the rationale of the steps you need to take to complete your project; and
- towards the end of the project, either because:
  - preliminary analysis points you towards literature you had not previously considered, or
  - to check for relevant studies published since your previous literature searches.

In this chapter my aim is to provide guidance on how to carry out a literature review during the development of your research question. Please note, however, that if you plan to use grounded theory, then your review would be delayed and carried out after some initial data collection (see Chapter 7). You need to carry out a thorough literature review at this stage to:

- find out what has already been done;
- understand the kinds of questions people interested in your general topic area have already been asking; and
- get to grips with the issues that are relevant to your area of interest.

To help you with this task, this chapter is divided into four main sections representing key components of a literature review. Although the focus of this chapter is on doing a literature review in order to develop your research question, these components are relevant for any other time in your project when you need to do a literature review.

In a Nutshell: Key Literature Review Components

- Searching and locating relevant research, journals, books and related information sources.
• Identifying and categorising literature in a given area (including establishing what constitutes ‘relevant’ material).
• Constructing an account (telling a story) about the research, which can be chronological, thematic and/or discipline focused.
• Understanding the relationship between your literature review and research question(s).

In order to illustrate how these four components relate to each other, throughout the chapter I will use an example based on a literature review I recently carried out on conversation analysis (CA) research on pre-school children's conversational skills. The selected example is deliberate because the topic is of interest to a range of researchers, but the method I'm interested in is a specialist area. This meant that I had to find ways of identifying relevant studies from a large pool of research, much of which was not relevant to my needs. I then had to find ways of synthesising the relevant studies, so that I could write a review. The problems I encountered are similar to those that students face when conducting a literature review at the beginning of their project, and so my example helps demonstrate some solutions to these challenges.

Finding Relevant Material

There are a number of key bibliographic information systems that you can call upon when first searching (for example, ISI's Web of Knowledge; PsycINFO; EBSCOHost; PEP-Web Search). These facilities hold vast databases of published research, but may not contain all the studies relevant to your project. This is because these databases are associated with particular institutions or disciplines. For example, PsycINFO holds information on psychological publications, and so psychology students studying the topic of ‘motherhood’ might miss relevant sociological studies if they only used PsycINFO for their literature search. It's important therefore to think about the topic that you're studying and the available bibliographic information systems your institution offers, so that you can identify which combination of databases you could use to best suit your needs.

By this stage it is likely you will have gained some familiarity with the various bibliographic information systems available to you and have some knowledge of the practicalities of accessing them. But, if you're unsure, speak to your librarian.

One of the difficulties in doing a literature review to develop your research question is knowing what to search for when you don't yet know what might be relevant. So to conduct your review you need to be able to:
• search effectively; and
• determine relevance.

To search effectively you need to develop a strategy to search bibliographic databases that is consistent, realisable and methodical. This involves:

• doing a series of searches that strategically use key words, ‘wildcards’ and ‘Boolean operators’ (discussed below) to identify studies that are relevant to your project;
• organising your search findings so that you can conceptually map out the thinking of previous researchers on your subject.

Bibliographic information systems work by identifying articles (and other academic outputs such as book chapters or conference proceedings) that have the key words you've entered somewhere in the article (usually the title, author or abstract).

You can combine key words together in various ways to structure these searches. For example, you can ask for articles in specific journals by specific authors with a specific key word in the title. Alternatively you could give a combination of key words to be found in the title or abstract. This is where ‘wildcards’ and ‘Boolean operators’ (for example, AND, OR, NOT, WITH) can be used. These are codes that you can use to specify your searches. For example an asterisk (*) is a wildcard that allows you to search for different variants of the same term, and can be useful if you're looking for all the work by a particular author.

For example, a search for Forrester M* would identify publications by me where I've used my initial and also where I've called myself Michael (or Mike). It would also identify work by all the other Forresters whose first initial is M. So, if you only wanted to focus on my work because you were interested in CA, you might use the Boolean operator AND; to ask for ‘Forrester M* and conversation analysis’. Asterisks are also useful if you've got a topic term that can be shortened, for example, if you were interested in research on children's talk you could type in ‘children and talk*’ which would pick up research with children that use either the term ‘talk’ or ‘talking’.

There are many wildcards and Boolean operators, and not all are used across all the bibliographic information systems. So check the online help of the system you're using.

Want to Know More About Searching Databases?

For an accessible and detailed discussion of how to use key words, wildcards and Boolean operators see:
Top Tip: Strategies for Identifying Relevant Publications

- Start with everyday common sense terms.
- As your search progresses start to recognise the common terms used by authors doing research relevant to your study.
- Search by author for researchers active in your area (ask your supervisor for suggestions).
- Combine your key word searches with wildcards and Boolean operators.
- Use citation searches: if there is a key study in your area, you can use ‘citation search’ to identify all the papers that reference this key study. This gives you a way of identifying publications that might not use the key words you're searching with but are relevant to your work because you share the need to cite this key study.

However, knowing how to combine key words is not enough if you don't know what key words to use. If you are new to an area, initially only trial and error will reveal whether words closely associated with your key terms turn out to be relevant. At the beginning of a research project, one strategy is to use the most common everyday uses of words that seem relevant to your interests. Putting in these general terms and combining them with other related words will allow you to retrieve many items which may be relevant.

To identify which of these returns are relevant to your study you need a way of systematically analysing the kinds of studies being identified by these key words. Adopting a consistent and careful procedure to searching allows you to:

- create searches that pick up relevant studies;
- ‘sift’ though the output so you can ignore irrelevant articles;
- summarily describe the studies you find.

By developing a systematic way to search the literature and keep a record of your findings you can quickly gain a good idea of how many relevant studies there are in a field. And before long you will have a good sense of what previous researchers have found out or established, and some of the gaps in their knowledge that you might be able to address with your study.

Top Tip: Systematically Analysing Search Results
Shaw (2010) provides a set of accessible conceptual tools for systematic searching. Her procedure is to create a mind map of all relevant search terms and use these terms with the ‘CHIP’ tool (below) to help structure your search terms and to create a summary description of the literature in the field. The CHIP tool requires you to consider the articles you’ve identified in terms of:

1 the Context of the particular study;
2 How the study was conducted;
3 the Issues examined; and
4 the People involved in the study.

In the literature review I carried out, the relevant terms were ‘child’, ‘conversation’ and ‘analysis’. Notice immediately the numerous other possibilities associated with each of these terms given in the box below.

### Possible Search Terms Associated with Three Words

- **Child**: infant, school-child, youngster, kid, development, (and more).
- **Conversation**: talk, talking, dialogue, discourse, communication, converse, chat, speaking, speech, rhetoric, communicative (and more).
- **Analysis**: examine, scrutiny, inquiry, break-down, examination, interpretation.

Searching using all these terms would help me identify relevant studies with children that didn’t use my specific term of ‘child’ (for example, those that used ‘infant’ or ‘development’). But using all these terms would also create an overwhelming number of studies, which I wouldn’t be able to sift through, and which, for many different reasons would not be relevant to my search. I therefore needed to refine my search strategy.

When refining your search strategy you need to strike a balance between finding ‘everything’ ever published about a topic and not having such a specific focus that you miss important work within your topic of interest. In a final-year undergraduate project or dissertation at postgraduate level you are not expected to include and review all possible material. Rather, you should review a selected set of work that is relevant to your research topic area.

### Top Tip: Refining the Search Procedure
My aim was to find studies of children that have involved research using the methodology of CA (which is influenced by a theory known as ‘ethnomethodology’). Consider the results of the following searches.

1. Child* = > 100,000 items found
2. Child* and conversation = 1015 items found
3. Child and conversation analysis = 289 items found
4. Child and ethnomethodology = 16 items found

Notice the gradual ‘funnelling’ of the search and the corresponding reduction of found items. The relatively large number returned for the first three searches is misleadingly high and is likely to include a lot of irrelevant material. Reasons for this include that in search 3, for example, the database will search for anything that includes either ‘child and conversation’ or ‘child and analysis’. I could have chosen to search ‘child and conversation with analysis’, which may have narrowed my search in the right direction, but instead I relied on my knowledge of the area: ‘Conversation analysis’ is often described as a form of ethnomethodology and introducing this term immediately constrained the number of returns. I was therefore able to develop my search with my knowledge as a researcher in this area. Novice researchers may have had to more greatly rely on Boolean operators or sift through the titles or abstracts of the 289 articles until they got a sense of the key words being used for articles relevant to their research.

The actual number of articles you need to review will depend on the specific topic area you are working in and the question you are asking. If you find you have either many more, or significantly fewer, items than you would expect from looking at other review articles, then it is likely that your focus is too general or has not become fine-grained enough. In the latter instance it may be that your searching procedures are possibly missing potentially relevant material. When in doubt ask your supervisor for guidance on this point.

**Top Tip: Read Your Supervisor**

If your supervisor is actively researching in the area of your project, look up their work and include it in your review!

**Establish Relevance**

Alongside the practicalities of actually searching for material, doing your literature review also
develops other important skills. In particular, you need to begin evaluating whether a piece of work is relevant or not, and, related to this, whether the research is likely to be of greater or lesser value to your research question (if you have one at this stage). Both dimensions (relevance and value) depend on a variety of factors.

In a Nutshell: Relevance and Value

Ask yourself:

1. Is the focus of my research within or across discipline boundaries (for example, psychology, sociology, social anthropology)?
2. Within a topic area, how is the work evaluated by other researchers?
3. What kinds of methodology are deemed appropriate for the questions asked in this area?
4. What are the main theoretical ideas in the area and does the study I’m looking at explicitly or implicitly orient towards these ideas?
5. What is realisable research in the area in question? Identifying what is typically done, and what might be possible, will help you evaluate any new work you come across. (Also see Chapter 2 for developing your research question.)
6. How relevant does the study I’m looking at seem to my research supervisor or other researchers? When in doubt, advice and guidance from these sources can be invaluable.
7. Don’t forget to build up a set of detailed notes that categorise your studies with reference to these questions!

As you begin your search it will quickly become apparent what kinds of questions researchers in any given area have been asking; the kinds of methods they tend to use in their investigations; and, either implicitly or explicitly, the theoretical orientations that are prevalent in a particular area.

One of the most important sources of information to you during your initial searching are the abstracts (or summaries) of papers or research studies, which are often provided through commonly used information systems (sometimes referred to as ‘abstracting’ systems). Let us turn to some examples from the search stage of my recent review and consider two different studies. I want to highlight aspects of the rationale as to why one paper is included in my review, while the other is not and through doing so highlight the strategies you might use (see Table 5.1).
Table 5.1 Example abstracts examined during review


Abstract 1: ‘Despite much research into individual differences in social understanding among preschoolers, little is known about the sequential structure of adjacency pairs to corresponding individual differences withinalign, to confront each other, and to challenge younger children. Likewise, although studies examine family roles and hierarchies. The young learners’ of preschoolers highlight the importance of mental-state references, other aspects of talk, dialogic repetition typical of Mayan languages. have received less attention. The current More important, it illustrates the children’s study involved 120 families with 2-year-olds; development of communicative competence as video-based transcripts of observations of how they reorganize greeting structures or reauthorize family interaction were coded for quantity, messages through frame shifts. In the case of a connectedness, and content of mothers’ andgreeting game, the siblings disrupt its inherent children’s talk. At 2, 3, and 4 years of age, sequential structure using semantic children completed social understanding and counterpointing with different address terms. verbal ability tests. Mothers’ connected turns When conveying a question sent by an adult, the and mental-state reference within connected 4-year old playfully repeats it and recycles it turns showed independent associations with across several turns in alignment with his children’s social understanding (as did younger brother and his grandfather. The children’s mental-state references, both subversion of the social organization of talk overall and within connected turns). shows how the children interactively construct an Connected conversations provide a fertile emergent sibling culture that contests the social context for children’s developing social organization of the age-graded structure of the understanding.’


Abstract 2: ‘In this article, I investigate how two young Tzotzil Mayan siblings playfully manipulate the sequential structure of adjacency pairs to align, to confront each other, and to challenge family roles and hierarchies. The young learners’ intentional disruption reveals the early control of mental-state references, other aspects of talk, dialogic repetition typical of Mayan languages. have received less attention. The current More important, it illustrates the children’s study involved 120 families with 2-year-olds; development of communicative competence as video-based transcripts of observations of how they reorganize greeting structures or reauthorize family interaction were coded for quantity, messages through frame shifts. In the case of a connectedness, and content of mothers’ andgreeting game, the siblings disrupt its inherent children’s talk. At 2, 3, and 4 years of age, sequential structure using semantic children completed social understanding and counterpointing with different address terms. verbal ability tests. Mothers’ connected turns When conveying a question sent by an adult, the and mental-state reference within connected 4-year old playfully repeats it and recycles it turns showed independent associations with across several turns in alignment with his children’s social understanding (as did younger brother and his grandfather. The children’s mental-state references, both subversion of the social organization of talk overall and within connected turns). shows how the children interactively construct an Connected conversations provide a fertile emergent sibling culture that contests the social context for children’s developing social organization of the age-graded structure of the understanding.’

There are a number of strategies that can be used in combination to help decide about the relevance and value of an article for your review. Below I will outline two of them using my literature review as an example.

**In a Nutshell: Identifying Relevance**

Strategy 1: Consider (a) the words used, (b) the source of the publication and
Strategy 1: Consider (a) the Words Used, (b) the Source of the Publication and (c) the Authors

Being methodical is key to completing a literature review. So try to be consistent in your approach to each item you examine. As you begin to identify possible papers and chapters, you will quickly start to develop an expertise on the key words, relevant journals and names of the authors who are publishing in your area.

With Paper 1, we find ‘mother–child talk’ and ‘early social understanding’ as two typical examples of terms generally related to child conversation. With Paper 2, we find a somewhat different set of phrases or terms, including, ‘metalinguistic play’, ‘interactive emergence’ and ‘siblings’. As a researcher in CA, I know that the terms in paper 2 are more usually associated with the topic area of my review. For a less experienced researcher, you can make these judgements by relating these terms to what you already know about the subject from your lectures, other reading or discussions with your supervisor.

It is important to remember that you are learning on the job. So, neither you nor your supervisor should expect you to be an expert in the area. It is inevitable that with your first searches a number of publications that could be relevant might escape your attention. Similarly, you might include publications that are not very relevant. Don't worry – your skills and expertise will improve with practice.

As you develop your literature searching abilities, you will be able to tell how likely it is that a paper will be relevant by looking at the journal a paper is published in. For example, although on the face of it, *Child Development* would seem to be a more directly appropriate publication for research on language in children, I know that it is actually the journal that paper 2 is published in (*Research on Language and Social Interaction*) that has a history of publishing CA papers.

As for the authors of papers and chapters, the more you search the more likely it is that you will discover researchers who have published a lot in one specific area and this will give you a clue to the potential relevance of the publication. Again, it can help a great deal if you have already discussed with your supervisor what journals and authors are more likely to publish relevant material for your study.

Strategy 2: Being Clear About What You Are Looking for When Analysing Abstracts
When it comes to reading and assessing abstracts we can go through a process similar to CHIP (see top tips box above) in order to establish whether an article is worth obtaining and reading. There are a number of specific questions you can ask which will help guide your assessment.

1. Who are the people being researched in this study and are they likely to be relevant to my specific review?
2. What kind of methodology was used? If there is a tendency to use a specific qualitative method for the kind of project you're interested in this question may be relevant. But note that many topics are studied using different methods, so studies that use a range of methods may be relevant for you.
3. What is this research about?
4. What are the main findings? And what does this contribute to the topic?
5. How likely is it that this research will be relevant to my review?

Below, I have addressed these questions by comparing the two abstracts I'd given you earlier. For my review, I was interested in conversation analytic work on children's conversational skills during the pre-school years. This meant that I was looking for papers that used a specific method (CA) to investigate a specific topic (young children's conversational skills).

The processes I went through to assess the relevance of these papers are similar to those that you need to go through for your study. But, your study may require a less focused review. For example, you may not want to limit yourself to research that only used one method. Typically, a review of an area includes research that has used a range of different methodologies. Table 5.2 compares the two abstracts.

The example in Table 5.2 shows you the benefit of developing expertise in recognising technical terms or terms more associated with particular kinds of research. You can see that care should be taken during the early phase when you are becoming familiar with an area, and it may be that at first you want to be over-inclusive to compensate for a lack of expertise. Over time, you will start to recognise certain phrases and terms that serve as important clues to relevance. Reading about your subject and speaking to your supervisor about the most relevant key words, journals, authors and technical terms, will also help.

**Table 5.2 Key questions for summarising and evaluating the relevance of research papers to your review**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paper 1</th>
<th>Paper 2</th>
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<tr>
<td>2 pre-school siblings</td>
<td>Relevant. The</td>
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Q1: Who? 120 children in 3 age groups Irrelevant. CA studies rarely use such large samples. Studies often focus on only a small number of participants.

Q2: Methodology? Quantitative (Coding and correlations) Qualitative – CA Relevant. Although CA does not usually employ a coding procedure or statistical analysis, terms used in CA are evident in the abstract (e.g. ‘adjacency pairs’).

Q3: Research Question? Terms used are ambiguous and could be. Terms used in CA are evident in the abstract (e.g. ‘social understanding’).


Q5: Relevance? Irrelevant. No terms evident that a CA researcher would use. Unlikely to be relevant. Technical terms used in CA are evident (e.g. ‘turn-taking’). Likely to be highly relevant.

Telling the Story of Your Review

Once you have found the various journal articles, chapters, books, conference reports or any other relevant publication important for your review (for example government reports) you will then begin the process of writing the actual review. Given that your review might summarise anywhere between 10 and 100 studies, it really helps if, from the outset, you have decided what kind of review you will carry out. The number of studies you review will depend very much on the question you are asking and whether other researchers have addressed similar issues or questions to yours.

It is important for you to recognise that a literature review is not simply some kind of list of every relevant study carried out to date. Once you've got a big pile of relevant studies it can be hard to resist the temptation to describe one study after another, but this creates an overly descriptive list with few elements of evaluation, critique or narrative structure.

Students who use overly descriptive styles of writing tend not to:

- explain why these studies might be of interest;
- clearly highlight the focus of the studies;
- show how the studies they are reviewing fit into a more general picture of the emerging or existent literature;
- critically evaluate the literature they are reviewing;
Top Tip: Two Key Ingredients

To write an excellent review you should:

- critically evaluate the literature you are reviewing; and
- offer a coherent narrative.

For more information on critical thinking see Chapter 1, and for writing styles see Chapter 9.

Top Tip: Avoid Writing Your Review as a List

The following paragraph illustrates the descriptive and list-like style of reviewing literature that you should avoid:

Anderson, Smith and Jones (1998) did x, y and z in 19xx found out A, B and C. Brightlight, et al. (1999) then tested adults on the x, y, and z test and found out A, B and C. Tolstoy and Bekaerman (2001) investigated children age 3 and 5 and replicated the results of Jones and Solder (1993). Another study that looked at X was Zentner (1994) who found Y. [And so on, and so on, and so on].

Rather than being descriptive, you need to develop your own narrative. This does not mean writing a fictional creative story, but it is a creative act to bring together the research relevant to your study in a way that shows your reader the patterns in what you've found in an evaluative and coherent way. In this way you should tell a good story that highlights the issues, findings and debates in the field and which leads to you being able to ask a relevant and interesting research question, or set of research questions.

Reviews that have their own narrative:

- offer a coherent, logical story that is written in your own words;
- include relevant studies and interpret them;
- set out a framework so that the reader can gain a good idea of how one study is related to another;
- use these studies to develop a conceptual understanding of the topic;
• draw out the significance of these studies for our understanding of the topic.

For more ideas on how to narrate your literature review see Chapter 9.

In a Nutshell: Telling a Good Story

A good literature review should include the following key components:

1. Provide a good overview of previous research work that is understandable and coherent to the reader. Paying attention to how you set out the introductory paragraphs can really help here.

2. Provide a framework that will enhance your ability to write a critical review. (See Chapter 1 for a discussion on how to develop your critical thinking.)

3. Towards the end of your review, as well as at key points throughout, it is very important to draw out the rationale behind the question you are going to ask for your project. This will be related to the review in specific ways and the reader will recognise why it might make sense to ask the questions you pose given the background literature.

Top Tip: Writing a Review with Interpretation

The following paragraph shows the interpretive style that you should try and strive for:

In charting key aspects of the child's conversational skills and understandings, Wootton (1997) comments that intersubjective 'understandings' have three important properties: they are local, public and moral. For example, these understandings are public in that the child's conduct is systematically sensitive to agreements and preferences which have been overtly established within earlier talk. Detailing and examining intersubjective understandings is central to the work of Tarplee (2010), who addresses the inherent difficulties of using concepts such as 'feedback' to explain language development. Looking at displays of understanding, on a turn-by-turn basis, Tarplee (2010) highlights the child's orientation to sequential implicativeness, and makes the point that the particular kind of parent-child interaction where linguistic pedagogy is relevant is constituted by the structure of the talk itself.

This paragraph introduces three studies, explains how they relate to one another, and
provides some evaluative commentary. By writing in this way, you are able to highlight the important questions you want to address, and identify key issues in the field.

Review Frameworks

It can be useful to recognise that there are various frameworks for writing a review. These can help you structure your review. Below I examine four: chronological; thematic; cross-disciplinary; and theoretical framework.

Chronological Reviews

With this approach your aim is to provide an overview, history or chronology of the literature that you have selected for inclusion in your review. Here you have to be careful that your overview doesn't just simply fall into the trap of being a rather boring descriptive list as discussed above. Instead, try to tell a story about the literature from your notes collated from the articles that you selected as being relevant to your project (see above).

So, for example, after your introduction, which will tell the reader how your review is structured and why it is structured the way it is, you might begin by highlighting the manner in which one of the early studies in the area turned out to be one of the most influential. Alternatively, it might be the case that the early studies in an area quickly changed focus and researchers began to pick up on ideas that did not at first seem related directly to what had gone before.

From here you would then go through each study or even group of studies making sure that you remain focused on communicating (1) what the main findings of the article might be, (2) why this finding might be of interest to the area, and (3) what implications this finding or set of findings has for the literature. It is also very important to link each main paragraph of your review together. You need to keep the reader interested and in touch with the emerging story.

So, at the end of one section or subsection, you might conclude by saying:

It is therefore apparent that the main findings established by the 1990s were (x, y and z) and these ideas continued to have some influence into the 2000s, particularly through the work of Jones et al. (2001).

Then you would move on to discuss Jones et al.'s work. For example, your next paragraph might then go something like this:

The most significant element that began to emerge around the turn of the century was related to the work of Jones et al. (2001), who alongside Brown's work (2002) established that x, and z were only indicative of a, b and c …
Reminding your reader what you’ve said and what you may be about to say is called ‘signposting’ because it allows you to tell your reader the structure of your review and how your arguments fit together. This allows your reader to more easily follow the flow of your review. (For further discussion on ‘signposting’ see Chapter 9 on writing up.)

At the end of your chronological review you need to create a summary that leads into the formulation of the research question you are going to ask. We will consider this in more detail in the final section of this chapter below.

Thematic Reviews

In any specific area of study it is possible to identify patterns of research and to group the studies according to these patterns or themes. These can be discussed under different headings to give an overview of the relevant research for your project. In my review I identified approximately 40 studies as relevant, which I could classify under five themes or headings: pre-linguistic communication; repair; competencies and understandings; grammar; and childhood.

Using this thematic approach I could then formulate my review by saying, after an introductory paragraph:

As a guide to the emerging literature, child conversation analysis (CA) research can be classified into five general areas (a) pre-linguistic communication (b) repair (c) competencies and understandings (d) grammar, and (e) childhood. Such a differentiation is to some extent arbitrary and employed solely for overview purposes. While there may be some link between these sub-themes and disciplinary agendas there is not always a correspondence between discipline and topic areas. Furthermore, although there may be an implicit trans-disciplinary orientation to describing and explaining the development of children’s conversational skills and abilities, this is not necessarily a shared aspect of child CA work. This overview does not cover CA based studies with older aged children or child language impairment. (Forrester, forthcoming: xxx)

From there it is relatively straightforward to go on and set out each theme. At the beginning of a theme, remember to use signposting to remind the reader what it is about. Similarly, at the end of a theme, summarise the key points and include a linking sentence to the next paragraph.

Advantages of doing a thematic review include:

- You have less concern with who did what and when and in what particular order. This is
especially useful if research developments in your area of interest occurred in parallel rather than linearly, which often happens in areas that employ qualitative methods such as in health psychology, clinical psychology and critical/discursive psychology.

- This structure encourages analysis and interpretation of the material, since identifying your themes requires you to think analytically about the topic.
- Identifying and drawing out themes facilitates the production of a coherent account of a body of literature and critical discussion of the material from a particular theoretical or methodological perspective. This is often a hallmark of an excellent project.

**Cross-Disciplinary Review**

Areas where we find a significant number of qualitative studies tend not to be located solely within a single discipline. My example review is a good instance of this, since a number of different disciplines employ this qualitative method when looking at children’s early conversational competencies. When carrying out my review I could find at least five, including: linguistics; sociology; psychology; social anthropology; and education.

Rather than a thematic organisation one could provide a cross-disciplinary framework where studies within a particular discipline can be described and discussed with reference to the theoretical focus that a specific discipline might orient towards. For example, within my research area there are a number of CA studies that look in detail at particular linguistic elements of the child’s early talk – such as phonetics (Tarplee, 1996). In contrast, in the sociology of childhood researchers have considered how children’s conversational participation might be subject to specific discursive formulations provided by adults (Hutchby, 2010).

When going through the various studies relevant to your project you could firstly locate where each work sits and then, when summarising the work, provide some background to the distinct disciplinary orientation these studies tend to have. This will also help you identify issues yet to be addressed from the perspective that you are coming from.

Cross-disciplinary reviews are usually written with a bias towards your own discipline. For example, you might highlight the work carried out by researchers in your own discipline, or evaluate work in other disciplines in the light of what it can offer to your own. If you are unsure about whether material from a discipline other than your own is appropriate for inclusion you should check this with your supervisor.

**Theoretical Framework Reviews**

Sometimes students take a specific theoretical viewpoint from which to review the relevant literature for their study. This theoretical framework acts as a lens so that now the studies are
not only described and evaluated in general terms, but are evaluated specifically in relation to how they relate to the assumptions of a particular approach. Students who are drawing on a standpoint that contrasts with the more dominant perspectives in the discipline often use this kind of review, for example, if they're taking a critical psychology, social constructionist or psychodynamic approach. Alternatively students might use this type of review when they are using a very specific approach, and they want to focus their project (and hence literature review) on engaging in detail with the debates and issues within this particular approach. My review would be such an example, as it was exploring pre-school conversation skills from within an ethnomethodological theoretical framework.

Taking up of a particular viewpoint, and then providing a review that offers a critical account, is a skill that is acquired through the process of doing literature reviews and gradually gaining a deeper understanding of an area. As you develop your skills you will also begin to develop your own particular theoretical allegiances and orientations, which may influence how you want to write your review.

From Literature Review to Research Questions

The final and key element of a literature review is the relationship between the review and the research question you are going to pose for your study. I said earlier that towards the end of your literature review it is important to draw out the rationale behind the question you are going to ask for your project. Whatever framework you use for organising your review, the final section should be written especially carefully. Here, ensure that what you write makes your review and critical commentary lead logically onto your own specific question or questions.

Often a review is described as a process of gradually funnelling down from the ‘bigger more general’ issues down to sub-themes, and then onto the specific issues or area you want to address. In experimental studies, it is at this point that specific hypotheses are outlined (again, ones that make sense given prior studies and the issues identified). However, in qualitative methodological approaches, specific hypotheses are not typically set out. So, the production of a literature review which highlights the main issues and themes serves as the background for the reasons why the particular question you are going to ask makes sense. You haven't simply dreamt up a question on the spur of the moment – instead you have provided a reasoned and defensible background to the question(s) you are now going to address in your project. The reader should be able to guess the kind of research question you are likely to ask from the commentary and rationale that the review has provided. See Figure 5.1 as an example from my review.
Figure 5.1 Example how to conclude a review and articulate your research questions

**Conclusion**

When you first set out to think through what you might examine in your project it might seem a straightforward task to review what has been done before in whatever area you are interested in. Hopefully by now you can see that it is important to be methodical in your search procedures and your analysis of prior work. Similarly, it should be apparent that when you report your literature review you should write a coherent, critical and engaging account of the field, which logically leads to your research question(s). The following list of summary points should help keep you focused on the most important elements of the task:

1. Make sure you spend sufficient time developing suitable search strategies and becoming familiar with the various information systems available to you (for example, Web of Knowledge; PsycINFO).
2. Employ a consistent and methodical procedure when reading and evaluating abstracts and other summaries of relevant work: this will really help you with deciding whether a piece of research is worth following up or not.
3. Don't be put off by obscure words, phrases and associated terminology when you begin. Familiarity with technical terms in a specific area will grow as you become immersed in the research literature.

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<th>CA research on children, adult-child talk, and topics germane to understanding how children learn to talk are gathering momentum. There are number of identifiable themes in the Literature that linguists and child language researchers might subsume under the term developmental pragmatics. We have seen for example, the problems and issues which have arisen with the analysis of prelinguistic communication, the questions surrounding identifying repair skills, and the perplexing question of what exactly constitutes a participant skill during the child's early years. However, what is distinct about child-CA is the careful focus on how, why and under what conditions younger members of any culture gradually attain the skills necessary for producing those reflexively accountable sense-making practices that constitute talk-in-interaction. Ethnomethodologically informed child-CA extends the boundaries of traditional language acquisition research and reminds us that this is, first and foremost, a social-discursive practice, and it is for this reason that this project is going to focus on the question of how children gradually learn to close a conversation, an issue which has yet to be addressed in the literature. This answer to this main question will be gained through asking a number of related subsidiary question: under what conditions and at what age do children first recognise the end of conversation? What particular structures are utilised in their own first attempts at endings?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Shows the topic is relevant and interesting</td>
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<td>Reminds reader what they’ve been told</td>
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<td>Reminds reader there’s more to know and where the ‘big’ questions are</td>
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<td>Reminds reader of the approach being used, what its aims are and why it’s useful</td>
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<td>States main research question and that it addresses a gap in the literature</td>
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<td>Explains how this research question will be answered through specific, interrelated sub-questions</td>
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4 When writing your review avoid descriptively listing studies. Instead, critically engage with your literature and focus on developing a narrative of the research for your reader.

5 For the organisation of your literature review, make sure you have a useful framework, and flag up what you are doing in your introductory section. The reader will value being guided through an unfamiliar area of research with a clear and interesting account.

6 When writing your review, make sure different sections and paragraphs link well with each other. It is also very useful to remind the reader where they have got to by using mini-summary sentences.

7 Focus on providing an engaging critical account of the research literature. This is particularly important towards the end of the review where it is much better to articulate a critically informed summary or conclusion rather than a simple summary set of statements.

8 The most essential linking paragraph or section of your review is between the summary conclusion and the setting out of the question or questions you aim to address with your research project. This provides the rationale for what you are going to do and provides a coherent background context for all that will follow.

Want to Know More About Writing Reviews?

See Chapter 9 in this volume. Also:

References

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