

Writing a Potent Literature Review: Basic Form and Structure

كيفية كتابة وتطوير استعراض للدراسات السابقة : شكلا و مضمونا

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ملخص:

استعراض الدراسات السابقة هو عبارة عن موجز تحليلي مفيد و فعال من اجل فهم وتطوير موضوع البحث. استعراض الدراسات السابقة يسهل للباحث فهم التجارب السابقة و الأساليب المعتمدة، كما يسمح له من تقييم النتائج المحصل عليها، بالإضافة إلى أنها تساعد على تطوير الأسئلة المتعلقة بدراسته، حيث أنه يستفيد من الأسئلة التي طرحها الباحثون الآخرون، ويصبح بإمكانه صياغة أسئلة مميزة لدراسته. وتهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى إلقاء الضوء على كيفية تطوير وكتابة استعراض للدراسات السابقة في مجال بحث معين موجبة أساسا لطلبة الدراسات العليا والباحثين المبتدئين من أجل تبسيط منهجية كتابة استعراض للدراسات السابقة. الكلمات المفتاحية: استعراض الدراسات السابقة ، منهجية، باحثين مبتدئين

Abstract :

A literature review is an effective instructive analytical summary of a specific research topic. Though a good literature review can have many written forms such as a primary project of a research study and an introduction to a dissertation or a thesis, it critically evaluates the issue of research providing a clear image of what is found and unfound about the topic in the area of research. This paper aims to shed light on the right process of developing a literature review, mainly for the graduate and postgraduate students and novice researchers who are consistently struggling with writing a literature-based establishment for their proposed projects to facilitate theoretical progress in the field.

Keywords: literature review, methodology, novice researchers.

1- Introduction

The literature review (LR), which is also known as the backbone of a research, is the necessary relation to any primary study. Also it extracts the main ideas from other researches by summarizing the previous resources. A literature review is often conducted to provide the most relevant available knowledge of the subject area and it is what researchers go through to publish their works in any field. In fact in methodology, the need to uncover what is already known in the body of study prior to initiate any study project should not be depreciated. However the novice researchers and graduate and postgraduate students as well face many difficulties in writing such rationale, due to the lack of proper literature reviews in many fields such as the Information Systems (IS) that involves very few theories and concepts for quality reviews (1). In addition to the lack in the methodological frameworks that provide detailed instructions on how to gather, analyze and write an effective literature review.

2- Definition of a literature review

Investigators in every field of study write literature reviews as “proposals for funding and for academic degrees ,in research articles, in guidelines for professional and evidence –based practice , and in reports to satisfy personal curiosity” (2) and hence, they are found everywhere. A LR includes the integration of data from many sources, with a consideration of any gaps in literature and other possibilities for future investigation. The literature review can present a rationale for any research (3). In general, the purpose of the reviews can be explained from two perspectives, the author and the reader; the author must avoid writing “dry and impenetrable lists of poorly debated facts and randomly selected” reviews; hence, the investigator should present a clear image of the topic and its different perspectives and contradictory opinions (4).

Though the LR and the annotated bibliography, that is a list of the used references, have many common features, the LR tries to synthesize the previous works into a unified summary as per the author’s view. authors in (4) added that a good LR should have the following features:

- Comprehension: data should be taken from relevant resources.
- Fully-reference: permitting others to pursue the way of the author from the beginning to the paper’s conclusion.
- Selection: choosing the appropriate investigation tools to find the main evidence.
- Synthesis of main themes and concepts.
- Balance: views and concepts ought to be balanced.
- Critique: in the evaluation of the literature.
- Analysis: drawing new concepts from the found data.

3- Types of Literature Reviews

As reasons for LR differ, so do their forms as presented below:

a- *Systematic Reviews*

The systematic reviews are reviews in which results are gathered from different papers in one document. Systematic tools are used to present works which are related to the review question. The main contents of a systematic review are:

- An explicit presentation of objectives and pre-definition of the tools used in the study.
- A clear, reproducible methodology
- An evaluation of the validity of the results of the used studies
- A systematic description and synthesis, of the key features and results of the included researches.

Conducting a systematic LR permits a great deal of information to be assessed and synthesized into a shorter report. In addition, systematic reviews can help organizations and many policy makers in formulation of guidelines to improve the use of the best evidence in practice. The systematic review is the most scientifically hardy review and is usually considered as the ‘gold standard’.

b- *Meta-analysis reviews*

Meta-analysis involves the use of statistical tools to include the findings of primary studies. Combining the findings of different studies can provide more reliable and effective results than one work. A meta-analysis presents increased numbers of participants, and hence, a good chance of identifying a real affects as statistically influential (5).

c- *Narrative review*

Narrative review includes the use of a textual approach that refers to an analysis of the relationships within and between researches and a general evaluation of the effectiveness of the evidence. A narrative synthesis of studies may be conducted where studies are too different to gather in a meta-analysis review.

Narrative synthesis normally is composed of the following elements:

- Developing a theory of how the intervention works
- Developing a primary synthesis of results of mentioned studies
- Exploring ties within and between works
- Evaluating the robustness of the data

d- Secondary Data Reviews

This sort of review is a study project on its own right in which the author should start with an explicit stated objective for the research or the problematic of the study. The work is often organized by the topic, and the method adopted in the secondary data analysis tends to be qualitative in nature.

e- Introduction to a Research Subject

This type of review is useful to introduce the research subject and give a sort of a foundation for the researcher to form an effective analysis of the work. This brief summary can serve to induce the readers that the author has placed all the previous published works in the new research topic, which in turn can add to this body of information. The review shifts from a general appraisal to a more particular evaluation of the found issues (6).

4- The Process of Literature Review

The performance of a review presented in this paper is quite linear, hence is usually revised as the LR evolves and new areas of research emerged.

a- Getting started

The most essential first decision for potential researchers is determining why they are conducting a LR since this decision will affect the method used.

A LR is a way to present an author's knowledge of a specific field of research, including words, concepts, main variables and its approaches. The review is a "legitimate and publishable scholarly document". Therefore, the authors prefer to freely choose a journal and a topic that interest them. The first step should be a primary research that aims to look for how numerous published works exist in the relevant field to present a firm support for the review.

The second step is to state clearly the focus of the LR. In fact narrowing the topic becomes more challenging for many authors but it is necessary.

The questions, the search method and the set of standards used in the study should also be explained explicitly in the work (7).

Keywords used in the review play an important role since they are "the cornerstone of an effective search" (8). The author should consider all the words related to the field of study besides their synonyms and alternate expressions, and their correct spelling as well, at the early beginning of the search. Other factors, such as the language of the publication, review papers, year of publication and others that may confine the researches.

Most corpora have what is called restricted vocabulary so as to set up the keywords. These provide an effective way of restoring data that can use many terms for the same idea. The Reuters Corpus, which is now available from the National Institute of Science and Technology (NIST), have a corpus of Reuters News for use in research and development of natural language-processing, information-retrieval or machine learning systems. As an example of a comprehensive data base, it contains a list of two million terms which will support keyword selection for many searches.

b- Researching the Literature

A relevant study will define the appropriate articles and books and eventually forsake good quality papers. The process itself is out of the scope of this paper. Still, there is an overload of information available on producing powerful literature studies (see Figure1). Authors should follow a detailed, explicit, and inclusive research strategy.

Articles

Randolph J. (2009) A guide to writing the dissertation literature review. Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation, 14-15

Books

Fink. A.(2004) Conducting research literature reviews. London: Sage.

Electronic resource

Author, I. (2007). Brilliant Article. *Language Education Online*, 16, 1.
<http://www.LEA.edu/>

Figure 1 : Selected Resources

Though books can have a good deal of useful information in some research areas, most literature are nowadays available on the web, due to the fact that the internet, with many credible sites and electronic journals such as ResearchGate Website, Academia, and Microsoft Academic Search, has become accessible to all researchers. Moreover, the printed works are often not available if they are not commercially published. Those materials are called “grey” literature. Grey literature can involve dissertations, theses, conference proceedings and reports that cannot be searchable via databases and this kind of literature is so necessary in writing reviews. Still, the reliability of these information must be checked, as for instance, Wikipedia is a very common source of data and includes more than three million articles in different issues, even so, the content may be edited by the readers since the access is given to anyone. Yet, the rear several reliable Linguistics and Literature Websites with an open access (see Table 1)

Table 1: Linguistics and Literature Websites

Database	URL	Features
SSWL	//sswl.railsplayground.net/	Syntactic Structures of the World's Languages is an open database that permits users to know that properties (morphological, syntactic, and semantic) define a language, and how these properties relate across languages.
AJOL	//www.ajol.info/	African Journals Online is the world's largest series of peer-reviewed, African-published scholarly journals
WALS	//wals.info/	The World Atlas of Language Structures is a large database of structural properties of languages gathered from descriptive materials by a team of 55 authors.
Literature	//literature.org/	The Online Literature Library includes the full and unabridged texts of classic works of English literature
MEDLIN	//www.nlm.nih.gov/	National Library of Medicine includes abstracts and references from 1966 to the present.
IEEEX	//ieeexplore.ieee.org/	Digital Library includes +2000ebooks and innovative publications
SNDL	//www.sndl.dz/	“Le Système National de Documentation en Ligne” includes different national and international data in all the domains related to Higher Education in Algeria.

c- Evaluating the literature

This step of critically evaluating evidence is crucial for the researchers. A review of literature, if made well, may help to examine through the large amounts of published data in a specific domain. It should insist on the primary evidence that is the

original search, statistical study or report, rather than secondary evidence in which authors report on original study or information (9).

In fact, the evidence being investigated for a literature review can cover different articles with discussion, scientific reports and even one-author view works. The found literature should be evaluated in a general way that permits authors to assess the data from each source for contribution to the target literature review, with a regard to the form of the publication. There are some questions to consider when gathering and evaluating literature (10)

1. Does this relate to the question posed by the literature review?
2. Is the issue and its significance (scope and relevance) clearly defined?
3. Could the issue have been better addressed from another perspective?
4. What is the research type (quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods)?
5. Has the author fairly appraised the literature, including literature taking a position she or he does not agree with?
6. Does the work add to the understanding of the domain?
7. In a qualitative study, how clear are the author's tools? Is there an attempt to show the trustworthiness of the findings?
8. In a quantitative research, how effective are the components of the study paradigm (Sampling size and techniques)?

d- Writing the Final Review

After synthesizing the evidence, and once writing the review, authors find that their ideas are not organized in a logical way. Facts may be developed in different places and under many sections; however, every section has to be as inclusive as possible and then reorganized in the final review. This can probably be the first act for submission seeking publication (Manning & Hogg, 2006). It is hence necessary to recruit the revision of an expert to critique the article or provides support.

In reality, the article will start with the "Introduction" section; so as to provide a short summary of the scope of research, its relevance to the readers. In addition to the objective of the paper, the "Methodology" section should define the work strategy, the databases found and other resources of data developed. The "Discussion" section represents the body of the article that should also be organized chronologically according to the main focus of the article. The final review should explain different opinions. Tables or figures may demonstrate key points in the work, and a summary table of the bibliography being used is always helpful.

Finally, the conclusion has to answer questions such as "will this paper change practice or add to the analysis on the topic? What should the reader add from the review? Is there a theoretical plan that may be taken from the literature and would contribute to study? Are there weaknesses in knowledge that can be covered by other further investigation?"

It is so important for the author to express his or her own voice throughout the methodology. In fact, all journals have their personalized template guides which are very concise and can help the writing process by providing a paradigm for authors. It is worthwhile checking this before writing up the final paper. As the writing is carried out, the final finding must be powerful as "a good read literature reviews should get the reader going!"(11).

Conclusion

An effective review can be a good tool to the author to provide a critical analysis of the available data in a specific domain. Similarly, it can establish relationships with different researches. It can enable the finding of new investigation innovations and thoughts when reading and understanding more about a theme. It can help novice researchers to gain better insight into suitable paradigms for a future work, and provide information on collection and analysis methodology. How to write a review of the literature is a needed skill that every author should learn. Thus, this paper is aimed at encouraging readers to search topics within their own field of investigation.

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