

## Effective Literature Reviews

A review of the scholarly literature comprises an important part of most research proposals. “Appropriateness of the literature review” is one component identified under SSHRC’s “challenge” criterion, and refers to demonstrating clearly the aim and importance of your proposed research.

There is often a tendency to approach the literature review as a collection of summaries of papers (Webster and Watson 2002). An effective literature review is much more. According to Hart (1998), a literature review is the use of ideas in the literature to justify the particular approach to a topic, the selection of research methods, and demonstration that the proposed research will contribute something new. Bolderston (2008) similarly describes a literature review as an informative, critical, and useful synthesis of a particular topic that helps: identify what is known (and unknown) in the subject area; identify areas of controversy, knowledge gaps or debate; and formulate questions that need further research.

**LITERATURE REVIEWS DO HAVE A PURPOSE!** *A literature review supports the stated research objective(s). By the conclusion of a literature review, the reader should have a clear idea of the need for the proposed research.*

A good literature review is an *analysis* of the literature, not a summary. The fundamental goal of a literature review in a research grant proposal is to understand the relationship between the various contributions, identify and (if possible) resolve contradictions, and determine gaps or unanswered questions.

### ESSENTIALS OF A GOOD LITERATURE REVIEW

**E**A good literature review establishes the state of knowledge about the particular topic you are proposing to research. It provides a convincing argument that the topic is important and that your research will address an important gap in knowledge or understanding.

A good literature review **must**:

1. Provide the context for your proposed research
  - ✓ It is organized around, and related directly to, your research questions or objectives.
2. Demonstrate why the topic you are studying is important and timely
  - ✓ It presents an analysis of what is known and not known and significant gaps in knowledge or understanding.
3. Clarify the relationship between your research and previous work on the topic
  - ✓ It moves logically toward, or reinforces, your research questions, purpose or objectives.
4. Be defined by a guiding concept – your research purpose, objectives or questions
  - ✓ It is analytic as opposed to a mere description of all previous research, a catalogue of who said what, or just a long compilation of facts

## TYPES OF LITERATURE REVIEWS

Most literature reviews are one of four types. Recognizing the type of review you are writing is important for ensuring coherence and focus of the research proposal. Common to all types of literature reviews is that they reinforce the need for or purpose of the proposed research.

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### *Thematic or integrative*

A number of key themes are introduced and reviewed. Relationships between the themes are established. Shortcomings or opportunities are identified.

### *Theory review*

Competing or complementary theories are introduced. Theories are reviewed in relation to a research question(s). Lessons from the theoretical reviews are sometimes combined.

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### *Methods or methodological review*

Different methods, relative to the research, are introduced and explored. Applications of each method are demonstrated. Strengths and limitations are discussed.

### *Chronological review*

Key changes, evolutions, or paradigm shifts are identified. The significance of these shifts is addressed. How knowledge and understanding have changed is explored.

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## STRUCTURE OF A LITERATURE REVIEW

Some grant applications provide specific instructions or subject heading requirements for the literature review. In such cases, FOLLOW THE INSTRUCTIONS. In the absence of specific section heading requirements, use the three main components consistent across most literature reviews: an introduction, body (middle), and conclusion.

The **introduction** to the literature review is often a single paragraph that:

- Introduces the general topic and provide an appropriate scholarly or societal (e.g. policy, practice) context for the review; and
- Identifies the *overall* state-of-knowledge about the topic (e.g., the conflicts in theory, methodology, evidence, and conclusions; gaps in research and scholarship; or the specific policy or practice problem, need, or opportunity).

In the **body** of the literature review, you need to:

- Address previous research on the topic grouped according to theme, theoretical perspective, methodological approach, or chronological development;
- Draw together the significance of previous, individual studies by highlighting the main themes, issues, and knowledge gaps;
- Use strong ‘umbrella’ sentences at the beginning and end of each paragraph;
- Include brief ‘so what’ sentences at intermediate points in the review to connect the literature to the proposed research objectives; and
- Describe previous work you have accomplished related to the proposed research.

The **conclusion** to the literature review is often a single paragraph that:

- Provides a summary statement of the overall state of knowledge about the topic, including gaps in knowledge and understanding, reconnecting to your introduction; and
- Reinforces the research purpose or objectives, and establishes the potential significance or importance of your proposed research relative to the current state of knowledge.

## TIPS

Below are 11 simple tips for writing an effective literature review for your next research grant proposal. The list was compiled based on insight from experienced grant writers, reviewers, research facilitators and the scholarly literature.

**1. Be convincing:** Adopt a critical perspective. YOU must inform the reader about the status of knowledge; don't always defer to others.

- *Doe (2004) said that...Tom (1997) also said that... In addition, in the journal of Know It All, Mary found that... [SO WHAT?]*
- *Based on a study of ... Doe (2004) concluded that... This is consistent with previous studies (e.g. Tom, 1997; Mary, 1995), suggesting that there is substantial evidence to support... However, other authors (e.g. Someguy, 2003; Somegal, 2002) disagree suggesting that... As a result... [MUCH BETTER!]*

**2. Be concise:** Ensure an appropriate balance between the literature review and other important sections of the proposal. Make sure you leave room to develop the research methodology and other required sections.

**3. Don't reinvent the wheel:** If your research topic is in a well-established and well-documented field, make reference to it rather than reiterate it. Refer to seminal review papers, where available.

**4. Use evidence:** Appropriately reference your review so as to allow others to follow your reasoning. Reference the "right" sources. Don't leave the impression that you are not familiar with the lead researchers in your field or where the leading research is published.

**5. Avoid death by citations:** Include only those source materials that helped you shape your review. Resist the temptation to "over cite"; it consumes valuable space and interrupts flow.

**6. Be analytical:** Do more than simply *describe* what was or what is in relation to your research topic. Develop and present new ideas, understanding or interpretation from the literature.

**7. Stay focused:** Don't attempt to cover everything. Stay focused and isolate those key themes or issues that are most pertinent to reinforcing your proposed research.

**8. Ensure balance:** There are likely competing theories or perspectives. Discuss them. Ignoring them may lead a reader to believe that you are biased, dismissive, or uninformed of the state of research.

**9. Be aware of what is 'current' literature:** You're not getting any younger. What was considered "recent research" in 2010 is not necessarily current. If using foundational works in your field, be sure to also use the most current research to show that you are up to date on recent developments.

**10. Show how your previous research is relevant:** Cite your own work. Show how your previous and current research is relevant to the proposed research.

**11. Don't forget policy or societal relevance:** Although literature reviews are grounded in scholarly literature, introduce "non-scholarly" materials, such as policy documents, technical reports, media, etc. if relevant to your research. It shows that you are able to connect the scholarly literature and your proposed research to matters of societal relevance or importance.

## SOURCES AND SUGGESTED RESOURCES

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