**Teaching and Learning Centre podcasts: the DISSERTATION SERIES**

**Reviewing the literature: a text and a process**

Hello, this is Helen Green from the LSE’s Teaching and Learning Centre. In this series of podcasts about your dissertation, we’re considering the dissertation in terms of the finished, written product, but also in terms of the process of developing and creating that product. Today I’d like to focus on the literature review.

So we know that the literature review is part of your dissertation, maybe a couple thousand words, a few thousand words – depending on how you choose to structure your dissertation. But what else is there to know? I’ve got three main ideas in mind with respect to your literature review. First I’d like to talk about what a literature review is, and what it *does* – what functions it should fulfill. Then I have some advice on how to go about reviewing the literature and writing this part of your dissertation. Finally, I’d like to reflect on some qualities of a good literature review, and some common problems to try to avoid. I think it can be helpful to think about what this piece of text *does*. What its ‘jobs’ are.

But first, let’s be clear about what the ‘literature’ is. The literature includes the published ideas, data, studies, and reports about a topic. It ranges from academic, governmental, or non-governmental sources to the work of institutions like international or intergovernmental organisations. It can include commercial or industrial reports, analyses or papers developed by think tanks or in some cases, the press. Depending on your discipline, the literature you work with might also include historical documents or archives. If we begin by thinking of the literature as a set of published ideas, theories, data, studies, and reports relevant to your topic – one of the principle jobs of the literature review is to survey this literature.

Your literature review synthesises the main ideas relevant to your particular research question and presents them in an organised way. It also offers a critical analysis of this information. This can include discussing not only what is known about your topic, but also what is NOT known – we often talk about this as “identifying gaps in the literature”. The literature review should also show advantages and limitations of different points of view that you survey. This will also help to reveal areas of controversy. Remember – social science research questions don’t offer up simple, clear cut answers. So, in this sense, what is not fully understood, and where there are disagreements are opportunities for research!

So, given these “jobs” your literature review will likely include how the key ideas and concepts related to your topic are defined. It may also feature discussion of the most relevant theoretical ideas that underpin your research – and the main debates or questions about these ideas. You might include research and findings that are related to your topic, as well.

In this sense, the literature review has a “job” with respect to the literature. But it also has a “job” with respect to your research project. It provides a framework for your research - a context for your study. By giving a synthesis of prior research and the existing understanding about your topic, the literature shows where your research questions and your study fit in to the bigger picture and how it is relevant. This way, it clarifies the link between your study and previous work, and also motivates your current study.

So we’ve seen how this part of your dissertation relates to the broader body of knowledge and how it “services” your specific project. One final “job” that is ideally accomplished by the literature review section of your dissertation has to do with the reader!

What I mean by this is that the way your select, interpret, and present the literature around your topic demonstrates to your reader your familiarity with a body of knowledge – how you handle the existing material. The way you frame your project can also help show the relevance of your work - and possibly the originality and credibility of your work. More generally, it indicates to your reader you have learned from others and that your approach to your topic has the potential to be a starting point for new ideas.

So, in a nutshell, the literature review section of your dissertation is a clear, logical, narrative that you craft, using the existing ideas and debates around your research area, to frame and lead up to your own specific research question. By the end of the literature review, you want your reader to think, “*someone has got to study this question more closely!”* And of course, that’s when you begin to present your study.

Now I’d like to talk about the actual process of reviewing the literature and drafting your literature review. On one hand, I highly recommend that you acquire or brush up your information literacy skills. What this means is that you become very familiar and experienced with using the research tools that are available to LSE students, mostly through the LSE library. By the Lent Term, most MSc students are quite familiar with using the Library Search interface. It is a minority, though, who know how to refine or broaden their searches by selecting for resource type, creation date, and the other tools it offers. It is even a smaller minority of students who know their way around the specialist databases: Web of Knowledge, the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences – or fewer still the discipline-specific tools: Public Affairs Information Service, International Political Science Abstracts, PsychoINFO, Econlit, to name a few.

There far more detail to go into about where to find and how to use these tools, but the good news is that as an LSE student, you have an academic support librarian, specialised in your discipline, who has expert knowledge on the sources and types of literature researchers in your field seek and how to find it.

Perhaps you simply want some pointers on general literature searching and finding journal articles – or you’d like more specialist advice on searching government, inter-governmental and archival sources. Maybe financial reports or market or company data is what you’re after.

All you have to do is get in touch with the librarian for your department to arrange a consultation.

They know a lot more about searching the literature than I can cover here – so let me move on to a few notions about the process of going through material and drafting your literature review.

It’s important to understand that reviewing the literature and writing up this section of your dissertation is a cyclical process. A literature review is not something you’ll write in March or April, then put aside while you work on your research, and then be able to just drop it into your dissertation at the end of August! I would suggest you develop an early draft – but then be ready to revisit the text throughout your research.

For example, in the early days, your topic may be a bit broad, but as you begin to explore the literature, you’ll discover some more specific aspects of your topic that you might not have been aware of before. Some will attract your attention, others, less so. But as you go deeper into the various studies and reflections on these more specific aspects – writing about what you find and what you think of it as you go along – you’ll be able to select what interests you and develop a clearer idea of the potential questions you can focus on. Then, you’ll start new searches – possibly with new search terms or in different journals and databases. Then you’ll start the cycle again.

Given this cyclical nature of reviewing the literature, there are a few suggestions I’d like to make about writing the literature sections of your dissertation. As I said, write often – as you go along. At times, we all experience this feeling of not yet knowing enough to write, and the temptation to download just a few more articles or consult one more book before you actually start committing words to paper. Resist that urge and try to write as regularly as possible: at the end of each day’s searching and reviewing – or in reaction to each main text you peruse. If you listened to my podcasts on essay-writing, the same principle is at work: writing is a way of thinking. Don't be tempted into believing that you can figure it all out, at which point you can then write it down!

Remember, too, that it’s your review – and there is no need to start at the beginning and proceed in the order that you’ll have in the final version of the dissertation! Feel free to start and stop various section as and when you find inspiration. You might even want to develop more than one section at the same time.

Finally, take every opportunity you can to have others to read your work and give you feedback. This could be an academic or PhD student in your department, a classmate or someone with good ideas you met in an MSc workshop! Of course, the TLC’s study advisers and the Royal Literary Fund Fellows are available during term time to look over your writing with you. You can arrange an appointment with them by writing to studentsupport@lse.ac.uk.

Remember that you are using the literature to build an argument, not a library! And this means knowing when to STOP reviewing the literature. The key points are to search for and collect information selectively. Read, make links, and take careful notes from the very beginning of the process.

The last thing I’d like talk about is a few aspects of what makes a *good* literature review? Now given the different functions of a literature review I talked about earlier, it shouldn’t come as too much of a surprise. A good literature review provides a clear basis and framework for the research. It should flow logically from theme to theme, giving a selective and analytical overview of the existing knowledge. It should clearly point out any gaps in the current understanding of the topic, and have an appropriate balance of theoretical work, empirical research, policy, practice, historical texts – as is suitable for the discipline.

Where literature reviews are less effective, there are typical pitfalls we tend to see. As with essays, a poor literature review reads like a descriptive text, sometimes even a list of what various authors “say”, with no narrative, no guiding concept. There may be a lack of reflection on strengths and weaknesses of the various explanations, models, theories. Remember that the number of sources is NOT an indication of quality; and a literature review should not be “everything ever written about topic x”!

That said, a literature review that is limited to readings assigned on the course is most likely to be considered narrow, basic, and lacking in independent reading and originality. Finally, realise that raising interesting ideas or issues in your literature review creates an expectation in your reader that these ideas or issues will be further addressed, and maybe to some extent resolved in the research project and the discussion section. Be sure that the ideas that you develop in your literature review are linked to the rest of the work for your dissertation.

In this podcast about the literature review for your dissertation, we’ve covered the main functions of the literature review in the bigger picture of your research project, some key points about the process of reviewing the literature and writing your review; and finally, some of the qualities of a “good” literature review – and a few common pitfalls to avoid.

As ever, I hope this podcast has been helpful. But of course, there are more sources of support to help you with your literature review – and with your dissertation, more generally. In addition to your peers, your course teachers, academics in your department – or possibly elsewhere –and of course your supervisor – be aware that you can get help from LSE’s specialist librarians, and the Teaching and Learning Centre.

Many thanks for listening to this podcast from LSE’s Teaching and Learning Centre! If you have any comments about this podcast from our dissertation series, please do get in touch with us – via the online feedback box, or by e-mail, to tlc@lse.ac.uk