

Searching for your Literature Review

Introduction

A literature review is a piece of academic writing demonstrating knowledge and understanding of the academic literature on a specific topic placed in context. A literature review also includes a critical evaluation of the material. The two main objectives of a literature review are firstly the content covering existing research, theories and evidence, and secondly your own critical evaluation and discussion of this content.

So an effective literature search will:

- Identify the existing critical opinions and theories
- Identify key authors/researchers
- Identify any research gaps
- Identify justifications and comparisons to your own findings

From your reading you may also identify appropriate research methods that you can utilise in your own research.

A literature search is a systematic search of all the research which has been published on a particular topic. You will find references in:

- Books
- Journals and Peer-Reviewed Journals
- Reviews and Reports
- Conference Proceedings
- Industry, Technical or Legal information
- Government information and Statistics

Plan your search

The first stage is to plan an effective search strategy. To do this you need to:

Identify the main keywords in your topic

Clarify what you're interested in:

- Impact, design, risks, management, outcome, legislation, standards, etc.

Consider your topic and make a list of:

- Alternative words or phrases
- Alternative spellings
- Singular/plural forms

Think about limiting your search:

- Date range
- Document type

You should then combine your search terms together to build up an effective search. Boolean search operators **AND**, **OR** and **NOT** link your keywords together and enable you to search more effectively:

AND - use to narrow your search and find articles which contain all of your specific keywords

OR – use to widen your search and include any alternative keywords

NOT – use to limit your search and exclude particular aspects of a topic

Phrases - use quotation marks “ ” to search for a phrase of two or more words

Truncation - use the truncation symbol * to include alternative endings of a word in your search

Wildcards – you can use a wildcard symbol ? \$ * within a word as a substitute for one or more characters

Choose your sources

The second stage is to identify appropriate resources to search to gather relevant and reliable references using the search terms identified in your search strategy. Searching an electronic database is the most effective way of locating relevant research on your topic which meets the highest academic standards. An electronic database is a searchable index of thousands of journal articles, peer-reviewed research, conference proceedings, book chapters and reports. There are two main types of databases: **full-text** services and **bibliographic** collections.

The **Electronic Library** is the gateway for accessing all of LJMU’s electronic resources:

Discover is a search tool that allows you to find information quickly and easily by searching across multiple subject databases in one search

To perform a thorough literature search you should also search subject databases individually to help you locate all the relevant references related to your research topic. Databases are available via the **Databases** option in **Discover**, click on your subject in the left hand panel for a list of suggested databases. You can also access Databases via the **Electronic Library**

Use the **Advanced Search** facility in Discover or a subject database to build up an effective search using AND/OR/NOT and the other limiters which may be available

You can locate other journal article references that you identify during your literature search by browsing the **Journals** option via **Discover** or on the **Electronic Library**

Don’t forget that the web can also provide you with relevant information. There is a wealth of information freely available on the web which can provide you with access to other types of information such as statistics, government and professional documentation. The web can also provide you with the most current developments in your field of research so you can keep track of what is happening now. You can use your search strategy to locate reliable and relevant information using the Advanced Search option available on many search engines.

Evaluate your results

The third stage is to evaluate the references that you have found. Deciding what is suitable information to use for your academic work is difficult and requires critical evaluation. One source might be of the required standard but not be directly relevant, another might be relevant but might not have been written by an author or organisation with the required credentials. You should question the **relevance**, **currency**, **accuracy** and **reliability** of each reference you find.

Manage your references

The fourth stage is to manage your references effectively. A literature search is a continuous process and it is essential that you manage the references you find and keep up to date with the latest developments in your field.

Notes - Dissertations and research projects often take months or even years to complete. It is essential to make relevant and comprehensive notes throughout the process. You should set your own criteria, for example:

- What do you want to know?
- What is important?
- What does it add to your own research?
- What impact has it had?

You may find it helpful to grade/categorise your references and link them to the appropriate area of your research. Good note taking is time well spent and will save you re-reading the same references repeatedly to remember why you originally identified them as relevant to your research.

Search Strategy - You should revisit your search strategy throughout the research process to identify new search terminology and new topics to research. Follow up your references by checking who is citing who. This will lead you to other key references relevant to your research. To locate individual journal article references available at LJMU use Find a Reference available via the **Electronic Library**. References not available at LJMU can be requested via our **Inter Library Loan Service**.

Storage - File management is key and will save you time and stop you from losing references. It is good practice to name all your files with relevant titles and create a folder system to match topic/areas within your research. Use your OneDrive as a secure place to store your files and remember to regularly backup your work.

To help manage your references you can use EndNote. EndNote allows you to build a library of references and offers 'cite while you write'. For guidance on how to download and use EndNote effectively please refer to EndNote canvas module NCSKI13, first time users will need to register.

Keeping up to date - It is important to keep up to date with new developments in your research area and capture newly published materials. You need to be aware of any new innovations or technological advances and know what leading researchers/companies are doing in your field. Search alerts are available via most databases and can help to keep you up to date of newly published materials. Social media may be an important channel for academic study and research, promoting new publications, tracking research impact and allowing you to network with leading experts or organisations.

In summary

An effective literature search is evolving and does take time. By using the tips and techniques in this guide to develop your research skills, you will:

- locate relevant and reliable references on your research topic
- locate references written by key authors in your research area
- locate references that cite other key authors/works
- keep up to date with current and recent developments

Further Support

If you would like further information or training, please contact your **Academic Engagement Librarian**. Contact details and lists of recommended resources for each subject are available online at: <https://www.ljmu.ac.uk/microsites/library/learner-support/subject-support>

Guide Updated: August 2022