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How to undertake a literature search and review: for dissertations and final year projects

If you are undertaking research for a project or dissertation, you will find that you will need to do a **literature review**, based on the findings of your **literature search**. This guide is mainly about the literature search process, but there are some suggestions on how you might structure your literature review.

Using literature

You need to use the published literature when you are starting any research project in order to:

- provide an academic basis to your research
- clarify your ideas and findings
- find data and research methods.

Using the published literature is a core part of the academic communication process. It connects your work to the great scholarly chain of knowledge, and in more immediate terms it demonstrates your understanding and puts the work you have done in a wider context.

You might also find that there is an added benefit since you will find information about the subject before committing yourself to time-consuming practical research work.

The literature search

In order to analyse the published body of knowledge on a subject, you will first need to do a literature search to identify relevant and appropriate material. Remember that the information you find in your literature search does not just slot into the 'literature review' section of a dissertation or other piece of work: it should inform and underpin everything you write.

This can be a confusing and time-consuming process but there are some simple rules which make the process work much more effectively.

1. Decide on your topic (also called 'Drawing up a research question')

First of all you need to decide what exactly you want to find out. A precise question usually works better than a vague one, so if you are looking at:

'The impact of television advertising on children'

you might want to think about what exactly you want to find out. A more precise question might be:

'Does television advertising have any influence on children's eating habits?'

2. Analyse the question and its themes

Next, think through what you want to find out about. If we start at the first topic you identified, you can see that the analysis gets much more complicated.

Are you interested in the impact of television advertising on:

Children	in terms of behaviour, eating habits, lifestyles, consumerism
Education	in terms of classroom behaviour, school meals
Households	in terms of changing shopping behaviour, changed cultural values, eating habits
Policy	in terms of health, advertising regulation, economic impact
Advertising	in terms of media channels, advertising revenues, creative design
Marketing	in terms of how to reach more children or adults

So, a precise question helps you along with the analysis.

Also what are the limits to your investigation? Are you going to restrict by:

Time	only current issues, rather than historic trends?
Country	UK only or international as well?
Discipline	are you approaching this from a Media Studies, Health, Psychology, Marketing, Politics perspective?
Gender	are you interested in children or just boys or only girls?
Age	are you interested in children or particular age groups like the under 5s or 8-12s?
Type of material	are you interested in research material or popular and practitioner/trade publications?

It is a good idea to think about boundaries. Until you have started your literature search you do not necessarily know whether there will be enough/too much/too little relevant material. Analysing the topic and its boundaries can help you later if you get bogged down.

TIP: Reading a general text or doing some browsing on the Internet can be a helpful way of clarifying your thoughts at this stage, and ensuring you focus on exactly what you want to research.

3. Identify keywords

This is a really important stage. Search engines and library databases do not look for your ideas; they just try to match up the words that you use. Sometimes this can be a very straightforward process (especially in science and technology), but more often you need to think carefully about the keywords you use to express your ideas (especially in social sciences and the humanities).

Here are some important principles to consider when selecting keywords:

Be specific	Start your search by using the words that **really** define your research topic
Similar and related terms	Are there other words with similar meanings? List them.
Spellings and terminology	Can your search term be spelt in different ways? *Behaviour* or *behavior* for example? Many databases and search engines don't automatically call up the US spelling or terminology.
Singulars and plurals	The same point with singulars and plurals. Try both. Usually people and things are plural, ideas are expressed as singular.
Combining terms	Remember you can search for phrases or combine terms using AND, OR and NOT. It is often a good idea to split up a phrase and link it by AND if you aren't getting enough results.
Truncating terms	Most databases will allow you to search for terms that begin with the same stem. By using * $ or ? at the end of, for example; *politi* a database will search for politic, politics and political. The symbol used will vary between databases so do check the help screens to find out which one to use.

Example – using singulars and plurals

Imagine that I am interested in finding out about the influence of celebrities in promoting products. My research question is, 'Does celebrity endorsement work?'

In terms of keywords I could just search for celebrity endorsement but I will get better results if I look for celebrities AND endorsements as well as the phrase 'celebrity endorsement'.

4. Plan your search

The next element is to consider where you will look. You can take a number of approaches:

• **Systematic** – you try to find all relevant material
• **Retrospective** – you find the most recent material and work backwards
• **Citation** – you follow leads from useful articles, books and reading lists
• **Targeted** – you restrict your topic and focus in on a narrow area of the literature.

In practice, everyone tends to use a mixture of approaches. For example you might:

• be *systematic* in looking at everything relevant in the library
• adopt a *retrospective* approach when looking at journal articles
• use *citation* searching to get useful leads if your topic crosses several disciplines
• be more *targeted* when you have a clear picture of what you need to find out.

TIP: You will need to use a range of material: one textbook will never be enough. You will be expected to have used some journal articles: see the 'How to use journals' guide for more information at http://www.library.dmu.ac.uk/Images/Howto/ journalsearch.pdf.

Look at the 'Finding information' guide in your subject area for the best starting points or the online guide available on the library web pages at library.dmu.ac.uk. They highlight the most useful starting points in your subject. You will also need to consider the following.

Finding books

Books are often a good starting point. Textbooks summarise key theories and more specialised texts often present research findings in a clear and comprehensive way. To be sure you have traced the relevant books; you need to look in three different places:

• **The library catalogue** – lists what is available in DMU libraries
• **Internet booksellers**, like Amazon.co.uk – list recently published titles
• **Library catalogues**, especially COPAC (www.copac.ac.uk) – these are comprehensive listings of publications. COPAC is a combined (or union) catalogue of the biggest libraries in the United Kingdom and Ireland and is an amazing and comprehensive resource.

Any items which are not available at De Montfort University can normally be ordered on interlibrary loan. Just ask at an information desk (and see the FAQ section below).

The library web pages at library.dmu.ac.uk have links to all the sites and sources listed.

Tracing journals

In many subjects journals are the key resource for any literature search. This may be because your topic is so specialised or new that no books have been published on it. It is also because journals are the principal place where research and practice are discussed and new work presented.

Your subject guides (in print or on the web) will list the most useful databases for searching the journal and report literature.

You will need to use **databases** to find relevant journal articles. Some databases will give you references so you can trace the articles in the library (or order on inter-library loan), with others you can access the full-text straight away.

Recent research and other sources

Postgraduate research students and staff need to ensure that your work does not duplicate other research projects. In order to do this you need to look at:

Index to theses – provides abstracts of UK PhD and Master's dissertations.

There are other, specialist sources in particular areas for research and many other kinds of material. Consult your subject guides or contact your subject librarian for further information.

5. Start the search

The next stage is to actually start the search! Go through the sources listed in your 'Finding information' guide and listed on the library web pages.

Remember the advice supplied in section 3 about keywords. Keep a record of what keywords, and which databases you use.
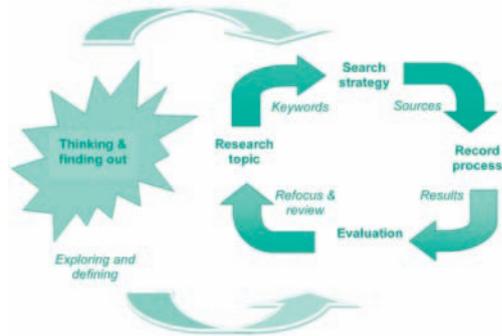
6. Read some of the material you have found

This is self-evident, but do look at the material you find. It will be helpful in two ways:

• You find out more about the subject

• It gives you feedback on whether you are finding the right kind of material

7. Review and repeat again

Literature searching is a cycle and you will need to go through several stages before it is complete.

You may find that you need to modify your search because you are finding too many or too few references. Here are some suggestions:

Finding too much

Sometimes you will find that there is just too much information. This might be because:

• Lots has been written on your main topic

• Your topic has links with many other subject areas

It is up to you to decide how you will set the boundaries. Following the advice set in section 6 can help – if only because you may get a clearer idea of what you really want to find out.

Finding too little

This can be just as worrying. Try to refocus your topic, perhaps by carrying on reading while you do the primary research.

You will need to think of ways of broadening the scope of your project. In particular you can think about:

• Making the project (or just your keywords) more general

• Think about comparative or related information that might be helpful

• Don't forget to speak to your tutor. Sometimes it just happens that very little is written on the subject you have chosen.

TIP: See the Frequently Asked Questions for some hints on searching

8. Record the process

Don't forget to keep records of the keywords you used and the sources you consulted as well as references of all the items you are going to use.

9. Referencing and Plagiarism

It is essential that you reference all items that you use in your work to ensure good academic practice by acknowledging other people's ideas. It enables your tutor to see what sources you have used, gives more authority to your arguments, shows the scope and breadth of your research and avoids plagiarism. This applies regardless of whether you are directly quoting or paraphrasing the original source. All sources you use regardless of format need to be referenced so do ensure you reference images and diagrams as well as printed or online material.

Plagiarism is a serious academic offence and can result in a reduction of the mark awarded, a module failure or in extreme cases you may be expelled from the University.

Most Faculties recommend the Harvard System for referencing but do check your module or programme handbook. For more advice and examples on how to correctly cite your sources, refer to the **Harvard system of referencing** guide available at www.library.dmu.ac.uk/ Images/Selfstudy/Harvard.pdf or the **Vancouver (Numerical) system of referencing** guide at www.library.dmu.ac.uk/Images/Selfstudy/Vancouver.pdf

Frequently asked questions

Q How long does a literature search take?

This depends on your topic – some advice:

• Build in time to read and digest what you find

• Allow time for your interlibrary loans to arrive: they take an average of 2 weeks

• **Don't** leave it all until the last minute – it will only make life stressful and mean that you won't get the marks you deserve.

Q How do I get hold of the material I need?

There are three ways of doing this:

• Sort out your passwords so you can access the databases – ask at an information desk for help or email justask@dmu.ac.uk

• Use interlibrary loans to obtain material not held at DMU.

• Remember that you can use the SCONUL Access scheme to access other university libraries. Sometimes another university might have a special collection in the area you are researching. More information about access schemes can be found at: www.library.dmu.ac.uk/ Services/Otherlibraries/. You can check library catalogues of participating libraries at: www.access.sconul.ac.uk/ users_info/

Q What do I do if I don't find what I want?

Refine and review your search. Are you using the most appropriate keywords and the most suitable sources?

Q My supervisor has said I need to make it more academic: what do I do?

This often happens. You need to be more selective in your use of sources, and use more of the library-based ones. Two helpful ways of accessing scholarly material:

• Limit your search to the academic (or scholarly or refereed) journal search options available on many of the databases, and make sure you are using academic rather than trade sources.

• Limit your Internet search to sites which end .ac or .edu

Q I have found too much information – how do I make sense of it?

As well as the advice in section 7, try these more technical hints.

- Be more specific:
  - ► use more precise terms (*advertising* rather than *marketing*)
  - ► add in limits (*celebrities* and *endorsement* and *UK*) as suggested in section 2
  - ► concentrate on key authors and books
- Get the database to help you through:
  - ► Subject headings
  - ► Online help

Q Can you explain subject headings?

Many of the library databases use **subject headings** (also called **topics**, **keywords** or **descriptors**). Subject headings are added when the database is built and should summarise the content of an article or paper in just a few words.

To understand what is meant by this, here is an example from the business database **ABI/Inform**. Just imagine you want to find out about:

'Stress in the workplace'

Stress as an ordinary search term gets over 126,000 results – too many! Using a subject heading for stress limits my search to articles mainly about stress but still there are 7,800 results!

The database then suggests how to modify my search. These include more specific search terms including **Stress AND Employee problems** and **Stress AND Work environment**.

Q How do I get help?

Just ask. You will get help from your colleagues, your tutor, by going to an information desk or arranging to see your subject librarian. To contact your subject librarian email justask@dmu.ac.uk or contact them directly, their details are available from www.library.dmu.ac.uk/Home/Librarystaff/index.php?page=53

Literature review

The literature review is where you present your analysis of the literature you have found. First of all check the format for presenting your literature review.

In most projects and dissertations a literature review forms a chapter of the finished piece of work, and it might also be a separate assignment, handed in at an earlier stage.

The literature review is a way of demonstrating two things:

- **Literature search** – what you have found
- **Understanding and analysis** – how you have put what you found into the context of your project

Key elements of a literature review

1. Provide an overview and an argument

First of all, provide a suitable start point by discussing your research question and your initial thoughts. It is a good idea to provide an overall summary of the literature you have found, in particular highlighting any gaps in research and conflicts in theory. Make sure that you also state your own perspective and the scope of your investigation, in particular what limits you established, and why you have chosen to review the topic in a particular way.

2. Read critically

The literature you find will not be unbiased sources of information. Think and read critically. For each item you read, you might want to consider:

- Has the author clearly defined the topic and question? Is it an effective analysis and account of the subject?
- Is there any bias evident (political, ideological, disciplinary?)
- How scholarly is the piece of work? Remember that trade and professional journal articles and many websites are often current but not scholarly. You need to include academic (also called scholarly) sources in your literature review.
- Is the argument coherent?
- Are there references to sources consulted? Have any sources or theories been ignored or omitted?
- Finally how relevant is it to the topic which you are investigating?

3. Write analytically

Try to summarise the arguments of different authors in relation to your own research question or topic. Think about whether you can compare or contrast different authors or theories, and consider what are the new or emerging themes. Remember throughout that you need to have an argument, or a series of points to make: do not just describe what different authors have written.

Often you will find that your topic overlaps different subject disciplines, which brings in multiple perspectives and different sets of literature: point this out, it only emphasises the thoroughness of your work.

4. Identify areas for further research

Relate the literature review to the rest of your research, and what the bigger questions are within the literature or subject. Remember that the literature search for the project underpins the whole of the work – including discussion of research methods as well as the literature review.

5. Personal reflection

Use the literature review as an opportunity to reflect on your own progress, both in terms of finding information and in critical reading. These are very valuable graduate skills, but often you do not see how well you have worked until after the task is completed. Remember that an understanding of the literature underpins and enriches the academic process; see it not as a chore but as a key skill for study, research and life.

For more guidance on writing there are a number of guides available via the ASK Gateway at www.askgateway.dmu.ac.uk. The Centre for Learning and Study Support also offer group or individual study tutorials on writing. For more information see www.library.dmu.ac.uk/link/CLASS or email class@dmu.ac.uk.

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