How to ‘do’ a literature review
Steps in Conducting Literature Review

1. Search for existing literature in your area of study
2. Review the literature selected
3. Develop a theoretical framework
4. Develop a conceptual framework
What Is The Literature?

- "The literature" means the works you consulted in order to understand and investigate your research problem.
- In other words, the literature review is a critical look at the existing research that is significant to the work that you are carrying out.
How useful are the following sources (Literature search)?

- Journals
- Books
- Conference Report
- Newspapers
- Thesis
- Internet
- CD-ROM
- Magazines
Journal articles:

- These are good especially for up-to-date information. Bear in mind, though, that it can take up to two years to publish articles. They are frequently used in literature reviews because they offer a relatively concise, up-to-date format for research, and because all reputable journals are refereed (i.e. editors publish only the most relevant and reliable research).
Books:

- Books tend to be less up-to-date as it takes longer for a book to be published than for a journal article. Text books are unlikely to be useful for including in your literature review as they are intended for teaching, not for research, but they do offer a good starting point from which to find more detailed sources.
Conference proceedings:

- These can be useful in providing the latest research, or research that has not been published. They are also helpful in providing information on which people are currently involved in which research areas, and so can be helpful in tracking down other work by the same researchers.
Government/corporate reports:

- Many government departments and corporations commission or carry out research. Their published findings can provide a useful source of information, depending on your field of study.
Newspapers:

- Since newspapers are generally intended for a general (not specialized) audience, the information they provide will be of very limited use for your literature review. Often newspapers are more helpful as providers of information about recent trends, discoveries or changes, e.g. announcing changes in government policy, but you should then search for more detailed information in other sources.
Theses and dissertations:

- These can be useful sources of information. However there are disadvantages:
- 1) they can be difficult to obtain since they are not published, but are generally only available from the library shelf or through interlibrary loan;
- 2) the student who carried out the research may not be an experienced researcher and therefore you might have to treat their findings with more caution than published research.
Internet:

- The fastest-growing source of information is on the Internet. It is impossible to characterize the information available but here are some hints about using electronic sources: 1) bear in mind that anyone can post information on the Internet so the quality may not be reliable, 2) the information you find may be intended for a general audience and so not be suitable for inclusion in your literature review (information for a general audience is usually less detailed) and 3) more and more refereed electronic journals (e-journals) are appearing on the Internet - if they are refereed it means that there is an editorial board that evaluates the work before publishing it in their e-journal, so the quality should be more reliable (depending on the reputation of the journal).
CD-ROMS:

- At the moment, few CR-ROMs provide the kind of specialized, detailed information about academic research that you need for your own research since most are intended for a general audience. However, more and more bibliographies are being put onto CD-ROM for use in academic libraries, so they can be a very valuable tool in searching for the information you need.
Magazines:

- Magazines intended for a general audience (e.g. Time) are unlikely to be useful in providing the sort of information you need. Specialized magazines may be more useful (for example business magazines for management students) but usually magazines are not useful for your research except as a starting point by providing news or general information about new discoveries, policies, etc. that you can further research in more specialized sources.
Main steps when tackling a lit review

• Identify main areas of literature to be covered
• Find relevant publications
  - find, read, record relevant literature
  - select, categorise, order the material
• Structure the lit review
  - use sequential sections and sub-sections
  - use tables to summarise and categorise
• Write, write, and re-write!
Identifying main areas of literature

Your literature review should cover:

• Parent disciplines of your topic
  - may be only one; may be two or three
  - your research topic identifies these
  - e.g.: decision making, project management, consumer behaviour

• Context of your research problem
  - focus of your problem for data collection purposes
  - your actual questions identify context
  - e.g.: primary care, referral hospital, manage care system
Finding relevant publications

- Use computer searches of databases
- Carry out manual searches in major journals
- Locate copies of major conference proceedings
- Go through the reference lists of interesting articles
- Talk to your supervisor and other staff
- E-mail faculty members at other universities
- Join e-mail discussion lists in your discipline area
- Use citation index for forward searching (see library)
Finding vs. including publications for purposes of literature review

• Avoid overkill
• Beware of missing chunks of literature

Rough guide for doctoral theses
- You may find/read 300-600 articles/book chapters
- You are likely to cite/include only 100-200 of these
Structuring the literature review

**First step** - Start by drawing up a ‘concept map’ or an overall plan of the Literature chapter

- Identify the main areas of literature
  - the ‘parent disciplines’ and the ‘context’ of your research
  - main sections of the Lit chapter

- Identify relevant sub-areas to be highlighted
  - sub-divide the main lit areas into smaller sections
  - the major subsections for each section in the Lit chapter
Structuring the literature review

• Section 2.1 (Introduction)
  - Introduce lit review with your research topic and explain what lit areas need to be reviewed
  - Present a concept map showing how lit review is structured logically

• Sections 2.2 to 2.x
  - Address each of the areas of literature in the concept map
  - Move towards specific discussion of your topic and identify what is known about it

• Section 2.x (final section)
  - End by detailing your research questions/hypotheses
General guidelines for writing a literature review
Place your research topic in larger context

Literature of research area

your topic
**Review your research topic**

**YES:** review topic

“Absenteeism has been defined in three ways:
- genuine absences, e.g. through illness (1, 2, 3)
- voluntary non-attendance, e.g. malingering (4, 5, 6)
- total absences, e.g. lost productivity (7, 8, 9, 10)”

**NO:** review articles

“(1) says .... (2) suggests .... (3) did a study and found ....”
Academic writing principles (which help structure the lit review)

• The ‘funnel’ approach
  from broad to narrow focus
  from main areas/issues to detail
  from periphery to centre of research issue

• The ‘family tree’ approach
  different levels of knowledge
  at each level: various options/theories/issues
Literature review – common mistakes

- Chronological story
- Annotated bibliography
  - e.g. each para starts with name of author
- Use of only old material; no new/recent work
- Focus too narrow; can’t see bigger picture
- No integration of material in new tables/figures
- No analysis (trends and contrasts)
- No evaluation (critical comment)
Literature review
- hierarchy of achievement

simple

- re-statement
- condensing
- critical comparison of studies
- summary of current state of knowledge
- recognising deficiencies/gaps
- identifying what can be achieved (future work)
- placing knowledge into context

complex
The literature chapter in the thesis
Literature chapter must not ‘stand alone’

Make sure the lit review is closely linked to your study
• mention your research topic up-front
• topic identifies parent disciplines and hence drives the lit search
• show how your study flows on from or is related to previous work (e.g. extends; fills gap; applies in Ind. context; etc.)
• use literature to develop your research framework or research model
• use literature and previous work to develop your research instrument (i.e. survey/interview guide)
Literature chapter - content

• Chapter introduction
  - mention topic
  - identify main areas of lit
  - present concept map
• Sections covering main areas of literature
• Section(s) about your specific topic
  - discuss research problem (and its relationship to other studies)
  - present research questions/hypotheses
  - identify research framework/model (where appropriate)
• Chapter summary
Process of writing the literature chapter

A continuous, on-going, iterative process...

read

write \leftrightarrow think