

Writing the literature review

Purposes for reviewing the literature when writing a thesis or dissertation. One important purpose of a literature review is to contextualize the student's research. This review may focus on previous research on the topic, or it may focus on background theory which is relevant to the project, or both.

The review should describe and synthesize the major studies related to the topic of the research.

It should also demonstrate the relationship between the student's project and what else has been done in the particular area.

An important feature of the literature review that many students are not aware of is the need for it to be an extensive review of previous research, right up to their date of examination. That is, the student needs to show they are aware of research relevant to their project that has been published right up to the point of submitting their thesis for examination.

What needs to be included in a review of the literature

A literature review needs to focus on the major findings of the studies that are reported on, when they were carried out and who they were carried out by. Reports on studies directly related to the student's project should be discussed in more detail, including information about the methodological approach used, data collected and analytical procedures used on the study.

The literature review also needs to include critical comment on these studies, telling the reader which are the best studies, and why, rather than just presenting factual information about the studies that are being reviewed.

This is something many second-language students find especially difficult.

The literature review should focus on:

- the key issues which underlie the research project;
- the major findings on the research topic, by whom and when;
- the main points of view and controversies that surround the issue being investigated;
- a critical evaluation of these views, indicating strengths and weaknesses

of previous studies on the topic;

- general conclusions about the state of the art at the time of writing, including what research still needs to be done; that is, the gap that remains in the research that the study will aim to fill.

A literature review needs to be an extensive review of the area with reference to **many sources and previous research. The literature review may be arranged:**

- according to the various questions to be asked;
- according to the various topics and sub-topics that are central to the study;
- according to the specific variables in the study;
- chronologically from oldest to more recent research;
- according to different points of view;
- or a combination of these.

There is no single ‘right way’ in which to organize the review of the literature. Often the nature of the research problem will determine the organization of this part of the thesis.

There are a number of questions that are useful to consider when describing previous research. Amongst these are:

- Who carried out the research?
- Who were the subjects of the research?
- Why was it carried out?
- Where was it carried out?
- How was it carried out?
- When was the research published?
- What was the result of the research?

Structuring the Results/Findings section

Purposes of the Results section

However organized in terms of chapters and sections, every thesis will contain presentation and discussion of results/findings. As Thompson (1993) found, prescriptive study guides may mislead students as they present Results sections as being **purely ‘objective’ descriptions**, without acknowledging that these sections inevitably contain **argumentation** and **evaluation** as well. It is vital that the second language student understands that successful Results sections are **never mere presentation or reporting** but always **involve selecting and ordering the data** in a way that is designed to guide the reader to the understandings the researcher wishes the reader to come to. The writer must thus **draw out** the significance of the data, highlight significant **trends and comparisons**, and keep indicating to the reader where in the data he or she is being led. Linking figures and tables to text and selecting which data to highlight then becomes very important as the ‘argument’ is built up. In the Results component of the thesis, writers typically use language for the **rhetorical (persuasive)** purposes outlined in Table 9.1. In Move 1, the information provided is both metatextual – referring to the overall structure of the thesis or chapter itself – and preparatory, in that it sets the scene for the presentation of the results to follow. Sentences that point to the location of tables, figures and graphs also form part of Move 1 as they comment on other parts of the text. Move 2 contains the actual reporting of the results. Move 3 then begins to provide a commentary on or an interpretation of the results. These moves or stages tend to occur in the sequence 1–2–3 but may be recycled a number of times as the results are presented, in particular, the presentation of results move (Move 2) and the commenting on results move (Move 3). Move 2 is virtually always present in some form, while Moves 1 and 3 are less predictable. Note that Move 3 may sometimes be located in a separate ‘discussion of results’ section.

Table 9.1 Typical elements in reporting Results sections of theses

<i>Move</i>	<i>Purpose</i>
1 Presenting metatextual information	presents preparatory information by: previewing, linking, providing background information, referring back to methodology points to location of tables, figures and graphs
2 Presenting results	presents results (findings) presents procedures restates hypotheses or research questions states what the data are and highlights data for reader's attention provides evidence e.g. statistics, examples; frequently presents information visually (e.g. graphs, tables, figures, photographs)
3 Commenting on results	begins to interpret results and make claims looks for meaning and significance; may point to contribution to field makes comparison with previous studies (often for justification of method or procedure) may comment on strength, limitations or generalizability of results

Source: based on Brett 1994; Posteguillo 1999; Thompson 1993; Yang and Allison 2003

The Discussion Section

Functions of Discussion chapters

Rudestam and Newton (2001) and Evans and Gruba (2002) provide helpful advice on writing a good Discussion chapter, they advise, typically contains the following Discussion chapters:

- 1- An overview of the significant findings of the study.
- 2- A consideration of the findings in the light of existing research studies.
- 3- Implications of the study for current theory (except in purely applied studies).
- 4- A careful examination of findings that fail to support or only partly support the hypotheses outlined in the study.
- 5- Limitations of the study that may affect the validity or the generalisability of the results.
- 6- Recommendations for further research
- 7 Implications of the study for professional practice or applied settings (optional).

Strategies for writing the Discussion section

Hopkins and Dudley-Evans (1988) looked at the structure of the Discussion chapters in master's theses in the UK. They found a number of steps that often occur in Discussion sections, as shown below.

- 1- background information;
- 2- statement of results;
- 3- (un)expected outcome – i.e. whether the result is expected or not;
- 4- reference to previous research – comparison of results with previous research reported in the literature;
- 5- explanation of unexpected outcome – i.e. suggesting reasons for an unexpected result (if this is the case) or one different from those found in previous studies;
- 6 exemplification – providing examples to support the explanation given in step 5;
- 6- deduction or claim – making a more general claim arising from the results of the study, e.g. drawing a conclusion, stating an hypothesis;
- 8 support from previous research – quoting previous research to support the claim/s being made;
- 7- recommendation – making suggestions for future research;
- 8- justification for future research – arguing why the future research is recommended.