Writing a Literature Review

The reviewing of existing literature relating to a topic is an essential first step and foundation when undertaking a research project. In this paper we examine the purposes and scope of a literature review; the selection of sources; citation and referencing; taking notes, organizing material and writing up.

Keywords: Literature review, citation and references, research

Introduction

In an earlier article (The Marketing Review, October 2000) we discussed some of the issues encountered in selecting a suitable topic for a research project and the development of this into a formal research proposal. In this article we consider a task which bridges both topic selection and the first step in implementing a research project - the conduct of a literature review.

The evolution and creation of new knowledge proceeds generally by a process of accumulation. Thus, in presenting his new theories, Isaac Newton observed, “If I can see further it is because I am standing on the shoulders of giants”. In other words his insights and novel proposals were only possible by building on the discoveries of those who had gone before him.

However, accumulation has its drawbacks too. Often the process is unselective and libraries are full of dusty tomes some of which may contain nuggets of gold but most of which are dross. The dilemma that faces a person encountering a new problem for the first time is: “Has this problem occurred before and, if so, was a satisfactory solution found?” Theoretically the answer to this question is to be found in the concept of the expected value of perfect information (EVPI).

While the concept of the EVPI is well-known in theory it would seem that it is seldom used in practice - at least in a formal way. In essence the concept proposes that one should invest in acquiring a new information relevant to the solution of a problem to the point where the marginal cost of another “bit” of information is equal to the marginal value of the enhanced knowledge and understanding acquired. Experience suggests most of us do this in a qualitative and informal way even if we are unaware of the formal calculation of EVPI. Researching the literature, what is already known about a topic, is an intrinsic element of problem-solving. The dilemma is how much time and effort (cost) one should invest in this task compared with the time and effort
one might invest in primary or original research designed specifically to solve the problem in hand.

This is a very important issue, which may lead to severe differences of opinion between theoreticians and practitioners. For the theoretician reinvention of something that is already known is wasteful and indicative of flawed research methods. For the practitioner, the issue is whether reinvention is more cost-effective than exhausting the existing sources of information that may be relevant before undertaking the new research into the issues presented by the problem to be solved. As with a most things, a compromise may be the only way forward. If we can define and agreed what is involved in conducting a “perfect” literature review when no constraints apply then it should be possible to agree what would be adequate and satisfactory when constraints do apply. In other words, “fitness for purpose” is our goal.

In light of these comments we have adopted the following approach. First, we summarise the purposes of a literature review and then look at its scope and the selection of sources. Next we examine the important issue of citations and references, which is of central importance to the process. We then conclude with some advice on taking notes, organizing your material and writing it up.

The Purposes of a Literature Review

In the Introduction we noted that knowledge grows through a process of accumulation. Occasionally, a scholar or researcher will make a major breakthrough that will change the world’s understanding of the subject and open up a completely new ways of thinking about it like a new volcanic island emerging from the ocean floor. Newton’s articulation of the Laws of Gravity or Einstein’s Theory of Relativity would fall into this category. However, such seminal contributions are rare indeed and most subjects grow and develop like a coral reef through the slow and gradual accretion of myriad microscopic pieces. In undertaking a piece of research it is vital that we steer a careful course if we are to avoid the dangers of shipwreck. Indeed while colliding with an island through lack of observation would constitute extreme negligence, running aground on a poorly charted Reef can be just as fateful! The purpose of a literature review is to avoid the calamities of ignorance and the reinvention of what is already known.

“[a literature review is] a critical Search for an analytical framework, or frameworks, which you can put to work to test a hypothesis (if you’re adopting a positivist approach) or to systematically investigate a set of issues.” (Jancovicz (2000), page 178)

By contrast with the amount of advice available on the subject of writing a research proposal, much more has been written about the task of writing a literature review. In addition to the book’s recommended in connection with
our earlier article "Writing a research proposal" (all of which are listed again at the end of this article) there is a number of other specialist texts which deal specifically with the subject in hand. Among these one of the best known is *Doing a Literature Review* by Chris Hart. This book published by Sage Publications is an Open University set book, positioned as a practical and comprehensive guide to researching, preparing and writing a literature review, the text deals clearly with a number of important issues.

According to Hart the literature review has at least the following purposes in research:

1. "Distinguishing what has been done from what needs to be done;
2. discovering important variables relevant to the topic;
3. synthesising and gaining a new perspective;
4. identifying relationships between ideas and practice;
5. establishing the context of the topic or problem;
6. rationalising the significance of the problem;
7. enhancing and acquiring the subject vocabulary;
8. understanding the structure of the subject;
9. relating ideas and theory to applications;
10. identifying of the main methodologies and research techniques that have been used;
11. placing the research in a historical context to show familiarity with state-of-the-art developments." (page 27).

A little later Hart offers advice on the planning of a literature research. He suggests that this involves six basic steps, namely:

- Define the topic
- Think about the scope of the topic
- Think about outcomes
- Think about the housekeeping
- Plan the sources to be searched
- Search the sources listed

(page 32).

In our earlier article we alluded to the circularity that exists when defining a topic and undertaking a literature review. In order to define a topic it would seem necessary to consult the literature that relates to that topic. However, once one has defined the topic it then becomes possible to identify which literature may relate to it. Indeed, in developing a research proposal it may be necessary to scan the literature relating to several topics in order to decide which topic one wishes to develop further. It follows that there are different levels of a literature review. In developing a topic description the scope will be limited, whereas once one has defined the topic the scope of the review will be determined by the extent of the literature itself, the scope and nature
of the assignment to be attempted, and the resources available to the researcher.

Ideally, the scope of a piece of research will be defined by the title given to the chosen topic. When it is crafted carefully the title of the piece of research will consist largely of keywords. It is the combination of these keywords that set the parameters of the research itself. Nowadays most students embarking on a literature review will have access to online databases. If one were to input a single key word such as “Marketing” most search engines would come up with millions of possible information sources. If we were to add the phrase “of blood transfusion services” the number would likely be reduced to a handful. If we were to further qualify the scope of the project by adding “in Transylvania” we might well discover a single entry under the name of Count Dracula.

In the earlier article, “Writing a research proposal” we observed that one of the problems you will experience is the need to review some literature to establish whether or not there is a research issue that deserves further investigation. Usually, this review will have been limited to major texts and the abstracts of the most frequently cited sources. Now is the time to return to this preliminary shortlist and dig deeper. Bear in mind also that acceptance of a research proposal implies agreement with the information and arguments contained within it. The issue now is the degree and extent to which the existing literature reinforces or challenges the basic issue your research proposal addresses.

The purpose of a literature review is to demonstrate that one is familiar with what is already known about a subject. This should include a domain theory or theories that have evolved together with any criticisms of them. To begin with one should consult those sources most likely to contain a summary or overview of the key issues relevant to a subject. Major textbooks, particularly those that have stood the test time and appeared in several editions, are a good place to start. Inevitably a textbook is never completely up-to-date but, at least, the better ones will contain a discussion of the main ideas and concepts together with a review of comment and criticism of these and citation of the work of those who have made major contributions to the field. Thus textbooks provide a start point from which to begin and reflect what is the accepted knowledge base.

Another good place to start is with encyclopaedias or reference books. While major reference works like the Encyclopaedia Britannica or Encarta may contain entries on some marketing or marketing related topics one is more likely to find dedicated entries to marketing issues in specially commissioned reference works. Over the years I have been involved with several such ventures including Marketing: theory and practice (third edition 1996); The Marketing Book (commissioned by the CIM, 4th edition 1999) and the Encyclopaedia of Marketing (second edition, 1999). All these anthologies share a number of common features:

- The individual entries are contributed by acknowledged experts on the
topic, many of whom have authored leading textbooks on the subject.

- Each entry provides a concise overview of the current state of thinking, identifies major schools of thought and their proponents;
- Entries are authoritative and suggest references for further reading for those wishing to explore the topic in more detail.

The popularity of the "formula" is evident in the recent appearance of the Oxford Textbook of Marketing edited by Keith Blois.

Overviews of the kind described above are undoubtedly a good introduction to the literature relating to a topic. However, they are also likely to suffer from a number of deficiencies. Few meet adequately the criteria suggested by Hart (1998) for a "quality" literature review when he observes:

"Many reviews, in fact, are only thinly disguised annotated bibliographies. Quality means appropriate breadth and depth, rigour and consistency, clarity and brevity, and effective analysis and synthesis." (page 1).

While textbook authors, and contributors to anthologies and encyclopaedias, will usually satisfy the first six criteria to some degree, their remit often precludes them from drawing conclusions of their own leading to the statement of working hypotheses to be tested by further research. In the context of designing and implementing a research proposal the literature review is but one element in the process and not an end in itself in the way that a textbook entry is.

Although a literature review may be an end in itself, in the context of designing and implementing a research proposal it is but one element in the process. Either way it is essential that it meet the criteria identified by Hart. To do so requires one to learn recognised skills and techniques and to observe conventions that have evolved which define scholarly research. Among these skills Hart (page 3) suggests:

- time management
- organisation of materials
- computer use
- information handling
- online searching
- writing

The need to manage one's time effectively was discussed in the earlier article "writing a research proposal", particularly the need to establish clear stopping rules i.e. to accept that a piece of research has been completed in terms of its declared objectives despite the fact that many issues may not have been resolved. As noted earlier "fitness for purpose" must be our watchword.

The organisation of materials is essential if one is to obtain the maximum
return from the scrutiny of existing sources of information. In the absence of a structured approach it is likely one will overlook relevant materials and/or mislay or misplace important references. Few things are more frustrating than locating ideas or insights critical to one’s argument only to find a one cannot trace the origin through a correct citation. We return to this issue later.

Computer use, information handling and online searching are skills that most students will have acquired some time before they are required to undertake a substantial research project. Indeed many will have learnt the skills in school or in their first year in higher-education. Successful online searching depends upon both familiarity with computers and information handling skills. Given the importance of the electronic media further advice on online citation is offered later, as are some suggestions on writing up. First, however, we must look at a topic central to any literature review – the correct identification and acknowledgement of the work of others.

Citation

The correct identification of published materials is a vital element of all scholarly research. In 1950 the British Standards Institution (BSI) published a set of ‘Recommendations’ (BSI 1629) which are based on a scheme prepared by the International Federation of the National Standardising Associations (ISA), which was the forerunner of the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO). The current version of BS 1629 is dated 1989 and is complemented by BS 5605: 1990 “Recommendations for Citing and Referencing published material”. BS 5605 was developed to provide a concise guide “... sufficient only to identify a source unambiguously and to indicate its nature,...” as such it does not cover special cases nor the degree of detail which is described in BS 1629. Citations to unpublished documents are the subject of a separate publication BS 6371: 1983. However, for all practical purposes BS 5605: 1990 should be your source of first choice if it is necessary to look this far for a reliable authority.

The latter statement introduces an important issue for the researcher. As we have noted on several occasions, knowledge generally grows by a process of accumulation rather than a cataclysmic insight. The issue for the researcher is: “Can I depend on the authority of earlier researchers or do I need to consult the original sources myself?” For the purposes of this article I felt it necessary to review the British Standards myself, as this is the recognised authority on the subject. Accordingly, you should be able to depend on the advice given here as being both authoritative and correct. This also applies to recognised texts such as Hart or Jankowicz or the guidelines published by libraries or academic departments for the information of students. For example students at Nottingham Trent University have access to an excellent pamphlet “Citing References: a guide for users”, compiled by David Fisher and Terry Hanstock for Library and Information Services. This guide is also based on the BSI recommendations and follows them precisely and accurately but, to convince myself of this, I referred back to the original
source. Satisfied by the authority of Fisher and Hanstock as a reliable source much of the following material is based directly on their excellent pamphlet. In addition, the appendix attached to this article is taken directly from their pamphlet and you'll find a website reference which will allow you to access the full text of the pamphlet as well as a number of other useful guidelines prepared for student use.

The point I am making is that it would be futile to keep reinventing the wheel by checking out every reference cited by an earlier researcher whose work you are using yourself. On the other hand you shouldn't assume that publication means a source is correct - it does not! As the Founding Editor of the Journal of Marketing Management, and a reviewer for a number of other leading academic journals, I am conscious that many articles are padded out with numerous references, which it is highly unlikely the author has actually consulted themselves. For example Fisher and Hanstock acknowledge their indebtedness to several sources for their advice on citing electronic publications - the International Organisation for Standardisation (1997), Cross and Towle (1996), and Li and Crane (1993 and 1997). You will not find these sources cited at the end of this article because I have not accessed them. Further, the interpretation of these original sources is that of Fisher and Hanstock and it is them I am citing as my authority. If you revert to Li and Crane and find them to have been misreported then I will have compounded the error by depending on an interpretation of their work.

So what is a poor researcher to do?

1. Select your own authorities with care - remember the authors of established texts will have had their work scrutinised by many other experts.

2. Identify one or two of the key references cited by your authority and check them out for yourself. (Nearly every major Marketing book will refer to Ted Levitt or Michael Porter somewhere-you should read these anyway!) *

3. Don't pad out your own literature review or bibliography with second-hand references. However, as I did, it is quite acceptable to indicate your source drew on another's work. If the reader of your work wants to check them out they will have to go back to your source to find them.

* [If your interpretation differs from that of your chosen authority then you will have to decide whether you can depend on it or not for the interpretation of other sources cited. Perhaps the first thing to do is analyse what is the basis for the difference of opinion and whether two or more interpretations are acceptable, and on what grounds. If you decide they are, you should advise your reader of the fact as they, too, may wish to check out the original source and the authority's interpretation of it before deciding for or against your analysis. Secondly, you should look at another major source cited by your authority and see if you agree or disagree with their interpretation. If you don't agree then you must decide whether to drop your authority in favour of]
another whose views match more closely with your own i.e. you believe that your interpretation would coincide with the authority if you were to consult all the sources which they depend upon as I have with Fisher and Hanstock; or decide there is room for more than one interpretation and make this clear in your own write up.]

Fisher and Hanstock (1997) give three reasons why we cite references:

1. to acknowledge debts to other writers.
2. to demonstrate the body of knowledge upon which your research is based.
3. to enable all those who read your work to locate your sources easily.

They also distinguish between Citing and Referencing when they define citing as “the way a writer refers from the text to the source used (ie the References),” and referencing as “the process of creating a bibliographic description of each source”. For all practical purposes the two are inextricably inter-related.

On the assumption that you have heeded the advice offered, and conducted an adequate review of the literature along the lines suggested, it is important that you report accurately what you have done and give appropriate recognition to the work of others. Hart (1998 Page 181) identifies several reasons why failure to cite sources properly may result in your work been thrown into question, namely:

“falsification misrepresenting the work of others
fabrication presenting speculations as if they were facts
sloppiness not providing correct citations
nepotism citing references of colleagues that are not directly related to your work.
plagiarism the act of knowingly using another person’s work and passing it off as your own.” (p.181)

While all these faults are to be avoided, and can be through accurate record-keeping, acts of plagiarism are most likely to have serious consequences. While carefully reporting the work of others will be seen as true scholarship, copying or lightly rewriting another’s work without attribution can lead to legal action for infringement of intellectual property rights. Academic bodies apply severe penalties, including expulsion, to persons found guilty of plagiarism and are taking increasingly stringent measures to detect it. (Given the case of downloading information from online sources and cutting and pasting this into what purports to be an original work, software has been developed to detect such infringements.) The full and correct citation of references is the best way of keeping out of trouble.

There are two basic approaches to citing references:

1. By numbering them sequentially.
2. By citing the author and date of publication - known as the Harvard system.

Both systems have their advantages (and disadvantages) and are widely used. As there are no clear cut rules for the use it is important to check out the preferences of the person or organisation for whom the literature review is written. Course handbooks, publishers' guidelines and academic journals invariably contain detailed guidelines on how to cite references.

Of the two main approaches to citing references - the Harvard, or author/date, and Numeric systems, the Harvard system is the more popular of the two and is most widely used in business and management studies. Personally, I prefer this because experience shows that if you omit a reference or wish to insert an additional one it is far easier to add another Harvard reference to an alphabetically organised bibliography than it is to re-number all references in your work that follow a change. However, the choice may not be up to you as most institutions and publishers have a preferred house style and you will have to use it. It follows that you need to be familiar with both systems.

Both the Harvard and Numeric systems satisfy the three criteria given by Fisher and Hanstock (1997) cited earlier. The fact that both continue to be used confirms that both have advantages and disadvantages. The main distinction between them lies in the method of citation: the references are identical apart from the position of the date. In this article I am using the Harvard system so that every time I refer to a source I specify the name of the author(s) and the date of the publication I am referring to. If I were using the Numeric system then every reference of whatever kind would be numbered sequentially - hence the editing problem if you leave one out! An advantage of the Harvard system is that you know immediately whose work has been referred to and when it appeared; following the Numeric system you have to look at the footnote and/or the bibliography at the end of the paper, chapter, book or whatever. On the other hand when writing a literature review you may well come across different schools of thought or multiple authorities in which case the flow of your argument would be broken if you have to list, say, 15 different authors and dates as opposed to stating "numerous authors 2-17 have agreed that...."

At several places in this and our earlier article we have argued against reinvention. In this spirit that we could see little merit in writing our own set of guidelines for Citing References and, with the permission of David Fisher at Nottingham Trent University, an Appendix is attached to this article which reproduces some of the relevant pages in the article to which we have made frequent reference.

**Getting Started**

We have already touched on some issues regarding the scope of a literature review and advise that this should be proportionate to the task in hand. That
required for a term essay will be significantly less than that required for an
honours or masters dissertation. In the case of a research degree such as an
M Phil, equivalent to one year's full-time study, then up to 50 per cent of the
thesis could be appropriate. For a PhD depending on whether primary
research is to be undertaken, then anything from 30 to maybe 80 per cent
might be expected. Irrespective of the time available, the quality of the final
outcome will depend greatly on how efficient and effective you are in
selecting and synthesising the material considered in your review.

At several places we have cited Hart (1998) as an authoritative source.
His book Doing a Literature Review comprises 230 pages of analysis and
advice covering all aspects of the process. It is obvious that an article of this
kind can only cover the basics and cannot deal in depth with some of the
more philosophical issues involved in doing research. That said, in this
section we offer some advice on several topics which are the subject of
separate chapters in Hart's book, namely:

selecting sources;
analysing arguments;
organising at your material.

Selecting Sources

As suggested earlier, perhaps the best place to start a review of a topic is
with a recent and authoritative textbook from a well-known publishing house.
While publishers are not infallible and can publish flawed work, they generally
use expert reviewers to appraise proposals and manuscripts. In
consequence, books carrying the imprint of a major publisher such as
Butterworth Heinemann or Thomson Learning are likely to be of high quality
and the authors are likely to have identified the main strands of research and
their proponents. For the reasons given earlier you should check out at least
some of the major sources yourself.

In doing so you will find that earlier researchers built upon the work of
others too and it can be worthwhile and rewarding to check out the
authorities cited by the current authorities. For example, in the mid-1990s I
attended a meeting of the newly formed Technology and Innovation Special
Interest Group (SIG) of the American Marketing Association as I had written
my own doctoral dissertation on the adoption of new industrial products at the
Harvard Business School in the late 1960s. At this meeting my younger
colleagues expressed great enthusiasm for what they considered the most
pressing research issues of the time while I experienced a strong feeling of
deja vu. Eventually, I ventured to suggest that Ray Corey had described,
investigated and explained the phenomenon under discussion. This
contribution was greeted with a blank looks and a chorus of "whose Ray
Corey?". Ray Corey was a distinguished professor at Harvard Business
School for many years in the field of what was then called industrial
marketing and is now referred to as business-to-business marketing. During
the early 1950s Ray undertook research into the problems experienced by
firms introducing radically new materials, like aluminium and plastics, to the market for the first time. His findings were published by the Harvard Business School Press in 1956 in a book called *New markets for new materials*. In my view the insights provided by the in-depth case studies he reports are as relevant today as they were then. The great pity is that few if any are aware of them. Indeed many researchers would not bother to consider any reference more than 10 years old as a matter of principle. In a subject like physics this may be an acceptable strategy. In the social sciences it can be disastrous and lead at best to much unnecessary rediscovery and reinvention and, at worst, to incorrect deductions.

A popular subject, Relationship Marketing is a case in point. Many leading American academics believe this to have been "discovered" by Professor Fred Webster in a seminal article entitled "The changing nature of marketing in the corporation" published in the *Journal of Marketing* (1992). This is indeed a very important reference and one which anyone doing a literature review on relationship marketing should read for themselves. But, the Scandinavian school has been researching the issue for more than 50 years prior to this and also deserves recognition, although Webster appears to have been unaware of their existence.

Put simply, if you stick to the most recent and frequently cited sources it is unlikely you will attract adverse comment from those appraising your work. On the other hand it is quite likely you will overlook the earlier important contributions and so be guilty of reinvention. Less likely, but much worse, you may perpetuate a mistaken interpretation of earlier research. It is for this reason you must check out landmark studies yourself and not depend on second hand interpretations of them. It is a well-known fact that repetition can lead to distortions - start a rumour among your friends and see what happens once it has been in circulation for a while!

Finally, there's always the possibility that you might discover something overlooked or misinterpreted by those who have researched the topic before you. On such discoveries are academic reputations built!

When referring to Ray Corey's work earlier we used terms that described the content of research - description, investigation and exploration. Most research studies will cover all three but some may consist solely of description, and some of description and explanation. When citing references it is important to identify clearly what aspect of the source you are reporting. Usually a researchers' description or definition of a phenomenon or topic will predetermine the working hypothesis, which prompts an explanation and/or the need for new research leading to an explanation. If you have been following Adamantios Diamantopoulos' discussion of research methods in *The Marketing Review* you will appreciate that problem definition, research methodology and selection of analytical techniques may all affect the outcome of a research project. It follows that you need to select approaches that are congruent with one another if you are to avoid mistaken outcomes.

At several places we have made the point that undertaking a preliminary literature review is an integral part of developing a research proposal. It
follows that if our proposal has been accepted we will already have:

1. come up with a tentative title.
2. developed a list of key words.
3. identified some key sources.

This will be of considerable help when we set about the literature review proper. However, we still need to decide where to start. Different authors have different preferences. Our own is to follow the sequence:

1. Textbooks.
2. Specialist encyclopaedias and handbooks.
4. Databases.

This sequence differs somewhat from that suggested by Sharp and Howard (1996) who propose that you start with relevant theses or dissertations in the library of your institution. In my view, this may lead to confusion as Theses and Dissertations tend to be highly focused and specific and so may not give a broad enough overview of the topic in which you are interested i.e. other authors will have selected that literature that is directly relevant to their specific topic which is unlikely to be the same as your own unless you are replicating their study.

My own preference is for what I term "successive focusing" where you start with a broad view and narrow this down by applying increasingly selective criteria and definitions so as to include or exclude material.

However, Sharp and Howard include a number of very useful flow charts for researching particular categories of material such as books, articles, recent references etc and you should refer to pages 88-96 for advice on this.

It is a well-known fact that knowledge and publication have been growing exponentially in recent years. In the UK the introduction of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) as an input into the formula for allocating public funds to Higher Education institutions has resulted in increased pressure on academics to publish scholarly research. The result has been an enormous increase in the number of specialist publications such as journals and Proceedings of conferences, not to mention posting work in progress on the Internet. Inevitably, this welter of publications has led to a decline in the incremental value of many marginal contributions (know among academics as "slicing the salami")!

One of our reasons for recommending that you start with text books and encyclopaedias is that the experts that have written them should have identified the most relevant sources when compiling their work. If this is so your task should be to see if anything has emerged since the primary authorities were published and update them accordingly. As well as restricting the volume of material to consider you should also be much better-informed and able to discriminate between the relevant and less or irrelevant
sources.

For journal articles an important criterion is the frequency with which earlier research is quoted by other researchers. This is best determined by consulting a citation index, which provides just this kind of information. (Sharp and Howard (1996) discuss citation relevance trees and using citation indexes at pages 79-83.) However, frequency is not the sole criterion and we have already warned that some authors merely cite sources without having consulted them on the grounds that they appear in other people's research. Accordingly, you should pay particular attention to those citations which contain some detail of the source being reviewed.

Surfing the Internet and using online databases is a topic in its own right (Editor, take note!) and cannot be gone into here. However advice on citing electronic references is given in the Appendix.

Having identified potential sources, the first thing to do is read the abstract to decide how closely the source matches the research question that interests you. Taking those that appear to bear directly on our subject matter we must now analyse the key arguments contained in them. Equally important, you must keep a careful record of everything you may wish to include in your final write up.

**Taking Notes**

Traditionally, the recommended way to take and keep notes has been to use note cards three by five or four by six inches in size. Nowadays, with the widespread availability of online sources, from which you can cut and paste, hand held scanners which can hold 1000 or more pages of A4 text and hand-held computers with usable keyboards, you may decide that writing notes and then transcribing them is an unnecessary extra step in data entry. While trained in research methods long before the availability of such modern aids to note-taking I do make use of them but I still prefer to use the traditional note card for the majority of my preliminary research. Be warned, this may just be a function of my advanced years and familiarity with the traditional methods. On the other hand I can still usually find information about my engagements from my hard copy Diary much more quickly than most of my colleagues with the latest model of upmarket PDA. I have also mastered a voice-recognition program and so can dictate my notes direct onto my pc as I'm doing at this moment.

Among the reasons I, personally, prefer to take handwritten notes is that I find it makes me think much more carefully about what I want to record and how to record it than simply highlighting the passage then downloading it to my computer's memory. When I do this I invariably find that I have to re-review the verbatim transcript to decide what idea prompted me to save it in the first place. Remember, a literature review is not a list of quotations from identified authorities but your interpretation of their work. Verbatim quotations are important but you will still need to justify your selection and use of them.

Despite the author's preference for handwritten notes, it is accepted that many people will have much superior word processing skills. If you have then
direct data entry may well save you time and duplication of effort. Indeed, software such as has been developed specifically for the purpose of classifying and synthesizing notes into a logical and coherent structure. If you do keep your notes in an electronic format then remember to back up your files frequently and keep a duplicate copy quite separate from your normal work place.

However you decide to keep your records, the first thing to do every time you access a source is to make an accurate record using the guidelines for citations given in the appendix. At first sight this may seem a potential waste time as what appeared to be highly relevant turns out to be useless and to be discarded. This is what research is all about. Negative outcomes are just as valuable and relevant as positive ones. Just think of the time you can save later researchers following your foot steps (or footnotes!) if you report that you are aware of P Guff (2000) in their "A load of drivel", Journal of Obscurity, Volume 1, Number 1, and found it useless.

By the time you embark on your first serious research project it is likely you will have had several years' experience of taking notes and developed a system that suits you. If it does, and is both efficient and effective from your point of view, then it probably conforms to the advice to be found elsewhere and you shouldn't think of changing it if it suits you. However, if you feel your note-taking is not as good as it might be then the following tips may be useful.

1. **Develop a Search plan.** In the course of writing a research proposal you will have identified what appear to be the major themes and key issues related to your topic. Most, if not all of these, will have been reduced to keywords and it is these that you should guide your search.

2. **Don't economise on note cards.** When it comes to organise and structure your literature review it will be much simpler to do this if you prepared a separate card for each key word for each source. The first card in each set is the source card itself so you will have prepared one for P Guff as soon as you set out to read his article. If nothing of use is found then record this on the source card. Otherwise prepare additional cards each identified as P Guff (2000) and the key word, which the note addresses. Like a paragraph, a source card should only deal with one major idea.

3. **Summarise in your own words.** Only quote verbatim when you wish to communicate the precise viewpoint of your source to act as a peg on which to hang similar arguments, as an endorsement or reinforcement for a particular line of argument, or as a counterpoint to an alternative school of thought. (Remember to cite the precise page location of verbatim quotes so you, and others, can verify them if necessary).

4. **Keep to the point.** In the course of any research you're bound to turn
up all kinds of interesting information, which is new to you. If it does not relate directly to the topic in hand, ignore it.

At several points we have indicated that research or inquiry involves three main elements - description, investigation and explanation. Description is the essential first step in any piece of research for it defines and delineates precisely what the object or phenomenon to be researched is and is not. Once something has been described it becomes possible to classify it and assign it to a category with similar attributes or properties so that we can establish whether and to what degree it conforms with or departs from what is already known about that category. This process of comparison and classification is investigation as a result of which our understanding is enhanced so that we may explain better the original research question and possibly extend and improve our understanding of the larger issues to which it is related. Much of this process involves what Hart (1998) terms “argumentation analysis” - the subject of chapter 4 in his book.

As Hart explains, the purpose of argument is to persuade others to accept a particular point of view by a "providing sufficient reason (or evidence) for the point to be accepted by others " (80). The nature of the argument and the principles relevant to it is far too large and complex a subject for an article of this kind. Perhaps the main point to emphasise here is that the social sciences deal with much more soft or qualitative data “based on supposition, inference and assertion” (Hart, 80) than do the physical sciences. Such data, much of it based on perception rather than objective measurement, calls for particular care and techniques in its interpretation. Hart's chapter provides an excellent overview of some of the major issues and you should refer to this for detailed explanation and advice.

Organising your Material

You will have gathered by now that while the product of research - an assignment, term paper, dissertation, article, book etc - appears to be linear in nature, with a clear beginning, middle and end, in fact it is the outcome of a largely circular process. Thus one has to undertake a preliminary literature review to establish the existence of research issue and then one has to undertake a more extensive literature review to illuminate the issue in greater detail. Similarly, in order to research a literature we need a framework and structure to guide our selection and analysis. Then, having gathered data we need to arrange, analyse and synthesise the material so as to present a clear and structured account of our findings and the conclusions we have drawn from them. It is largely about analysis and synthesis.

According to Hart (110) “analysis is the job of systematically breaking down something into its constituent parts and describing how they relate to each other - it is not random dissection but a methodological examination”. Clearly, the purpose of analysis is to enhance our understanding of the factors or variables, which make up an object or phenomenon and the ways in which they relate to and/or interact with one another.
By contrast, synthesis involves "rearranging the elements derived from analysis to identify relationships or show main organising principles or show how these principles can be used to make a different phenomenon" (Hart, 111).

Analysis is essentially objective in character and follows defined procedures using well-known and extensively validated techniques such as content analysis. By contrast, synthesis is often creative and requires one to look beyond the known and accepted relationships to see if one can come up with new and more powerful explanations of the phenomenon in which we are interested.

For many years I have argued that Marketing, like most other professions such as architecture, engineering, medicine etc is a synthetic discipline in that it seeks to combine and integrate insights, ideas and knowledge from other social sciences into a comprehensive explanation of behaviour in the real world in order that one may intervene in and influence the behaviour or activity in which one is interested.

Synthetic explanations are invariably more powerful and those provided by the elements integrated by the synthesis. For example, Philip Kotler (2000) in his now a standard text on Marketing Management, points out that different social sciences have quite different explanations of Buyer Behaviour and distinguishes at least four:

1. The Marshallian economic model.
2. The Pavlovian learning model.
3. The Freudian psychoanalytic model.
4. The Veblenian social- psychological model.

The key features of these four models are as follows:

**The Marshallian economic model** postulates that buying decisions are the result of "rational" and conscious economic calculations designed to maximise the buyer's utility or satisfaction. Industrial Buyer Behaviour is usually believed to be of this type.

**Pavlov's Learning model** contains four central concepts: drive, cue, response and reinforcement. Drives may be inherited or learnt - hunger is a basic physiological drive, ambition is learnt - but they are usually latent or passive until stimulated by a cue. In the case of hunger, this may be internal (being physiologically hungry) or external (the sight or smell of food), but either way response is called for. Only if the outcome is satisfactory will reinforcement occur and the new learned behaviour become habitual, or as Pavlov would have termed it, a conditioned responses.

**The Freudian psychoanalytic model** is concerned with the subconscious motivations which direct and condition Behaviour.
Finally, the Veblenian model proposes that man's attitudes and behaviour are conditioned by the norms of the social groupings to which he belongs: culture, sub culture, his social class, his reference groups and his family affiliations.

Each of these models, however, provides only a partial explanation and the real world buying decision would seem to be a composite of conscious and subconscious reactions to a variety of stimuli - some objective, measurable and "rational"; others subjective, difficult to quantify and often dismissed as "irrational". In turn, the reactions or responses will be the product of a host of social and cultural influences reflecting the decision makers' background, upbringing and current affiliations.

The relative importance of all these influences will vary considerably, depending upon the novelty of the situation to the buyer and the degree of risk associated with the decision.

From the foregoing very abbreviated summary it should be clear that a working model of Buyer Behaviour will have to contain far more variables than any of the single disciplinary explanations, which suppress or assume away the complications of real life.

So, now you have consulted a large number of sources and assembled a copious collection of notes. In the process it is quite likely that you will experience at least two emotions. First: "Is there no end to the information that has some bearing on the subject?" And, second, a feeling of deja-vu - while the ideas presented in most research papers are treated as if they were new they seem to be only marginally different from other work which you have already reviewed.

To deal with the first problem you must constantly and consistently apply your definition of the perceived boundaries of your research topic and ruthlessly exclude or discard anything that falls outside the boundaries.

As you defined these boundaries before you started your detailed search it may well be that you have to revisit and refine your definitions and boundaries. In doing so you need to explain and justify your decisions. But, in doing so, you will anticipate and address the question every researcher dreads "Why didn't you...?" While those sitting in judgment of your work may not agree with your reasons or arguments they should assess it against the criteria and definitions you have proposed. Provided these are not fundamentally flawed or fly in the face of reason then you should be able to achieve a satisfactory grade even though your examiner holds an opposing view.

The obverse of too much information is too little. However, it is not uncommon to find that having assembled an impressive list of sources the more one reads them the less and less the value added. The problem now is when to discontinue a search for the mother lode. As a qualified Prospector-you have been told how to identify the most likely sources - you should be able to decide when to stop digging. Of course, there is a risk that you will miss the discovery of a lifetime but the laws of probability should tell you that
such discoveries in research occur about as often as winning the jackpot on the lottery.

At the time of writing no one has won a million pounds on the Chris Tarrant game-show "who wants to be a millionaire" which requires you to answer correctly 15 consecutive questions. In field research the rule of thumb is that beyond 15 exploratory interviews you are unlikely to identify any radically new issues. So perhaps the same rule applies to the vast majority of literature reviews and you should break off the search and not go beyond 15 citations on a major research theme unless you are continuing to uncover worthwhile additional information.

Writing Up

Once we have reached the point of diminishing marginal returns the time has come to impose structure on our raw material and write them up. Anyone who has had to write anything knows that the most difficult thing is to get started. In the case of our literature review, however, we have a head start as we began by defining its scope and the themes or issues we expected to encounter. Inevitably, some may not have materialised or seem unimportant while others will have emerged that demand attention. That said, we should have a fairly good idea of what the finished article should look like.

In Chapter 7 Hart (op.cit.) discusses "writing the review" in considerable detail and proposes that a review may be structured in one of at least three ways which he defines as:

1. Summative evaluation.
2. Analytical evaluation.
3. Formative evaluation

All three approaches (and combinations/permutations of them) contain three basic elements but the emphasis on these will vary according to the chosen structure. In essence these three basic elements are those discussed earlier, namely:

- **description** of what is known;
- **investigation** or analysis of this work;
- **explanation** of what you believe this means.

Where the emphasis is largely on description (summative evaluation) the thrust is on defining and establishing the existence of an issue or problem with suggestions for addressing it. Where the emphasis is on investigation (analytical evaluation) then one is concentrating on the nature of a problem, its cause and effect as a basis for action to solve it. Finally, an emphasis on explanation (formative evaluation) compares and contrasts the various points of view that exist on a problem as a basis for determining which is to be preferred and what might be to be done to confirm this.
To a considerable degree your choice of emphasis will be determined by that of the earlier work that you are reviewing. In turn, your own conclusions and recommendations may well propose a shift of emphasis in order to address the issues underlying your research problem. For example, earlier studies may be long on description but short on analysis or vice-versa.

Irrespective of the structure you adopt, effective writing depends upon satisfying a number of criteria, as readers of this article are most likely to be students of marketing. You should not be surprised that the first and most important criterion is to address “the needs of the intended audience.” In other words, “Whom are you writing for?”

If it is a tutor or supervisor to satisfy the requirements of formal qualification then this is the primary audience and your presentation should be tailored to their needs. If you are writing for publication then the nature and positioning of the publication will have a major influence on the profile of its readership and so upon the preferred style and structure. For example, an academic journal such as the Journal of Marketing Research emphasises substance over style and may be inaccessible to the vast majority of business people with an interest in marketing research. By contrast the Harvard Business Review emphasises style and presentation over substance with the result that the readers of JMR may see its approach and content as lacking rigour. As with any other product or service the perceived value of your literature review will be determined by the needs and expectations of the reader. Hart (1998, 198) suggests the reader will be looking for evidence that:

1. you have a clear understanding of the topic;
2. you have identified all major studies related to your topic and discussed most of them;
3. you have developed, on the basis of your review, a clearly stated research problem;
4. you have drawn clear and appropriate conclusions from prior research;
5. you have established and described the various points of view related to your research topic;
6. you are proposing valid Recommendations based upon analysis of the information contained in your sources;
7. you have demonstrated that there is a genuine research issue that has to be addressed.
(Adapted from Hart, page 198)

In satisfying these criteria it will help greatly if:

1. You seek to gain and sustain the interest of your reader. Try to communicate why you feel your topic is important and why you are enthusiastic about it.
2. You have a clear beginning, middle and end. You should tell the reader what you’re going to tell them, why, and in what manner. Tell them,
following the logic and structure you have laid out, and then tell them what you have told them by summarising the key arguments and conclusions/Recommendations drawn from your analysis.

3. Write clearly and coherently - there is a world of difference between scholarship and obfuscation. It is your task to make the complex clear, not to confuse the reader with obscure and obtuse references in the mistaken belief that the more difficult it is to understand the more erudite it must be.

4. Finally, try it out on an intelligent layperson with no pretensions to expertise on the topic to see if it passes the acid tests of being both understandable and interesting.

Summary

Remember, when writing you need to tell the reader what it is you intend to tell them (and how), then tell them in such detail as is necessary to get across your message, and then, to make sure, tell them what you’ve told them.

In this paper we began with a short discussion of the purposes of a literature review and argued that ‘fitness for purpose’ must be our watchword; i.e. we need to demonstrate a sufficient familiarity with prior work on the same topic to convince the reader that we are fully aware of its strengths and shortcomings and that the research issue we are seeking to address is a real one. The scope of this review will depend significantly on the nature of the project and the needs of the intended audience.

Given that a literature review is an account of previous published work, it is vital that we identify correctly the sources of the material referred to in our survey. To do so we must be familiar with the conventions for citing correctly such earlier work and we discussed this topic in some detail. In addition, the Appendix attached to this article contains detailed advice on the use of the two main systems – the Harvard and Numeric systems – as well as the citation of electronic references.

Next, we looked at the selection of sources and offered some advice on an approach that we identified as ‘successive focusing’ beginning with established textbooks and progressing through specialist encyclopaedias and handbooks to journals and databases. Some advice on note taking and organizing the material collected was then given.

Finally, we looked briefly at how to set about writing up the fruits of our labour into a coherent and convincing statement on which to found our proposals for our own original research. All you have to do now is get started.

Good luck!

References and Recommendations for Further Reading


 Takes the view that all research leads to a report whatever it may be called. Written from the perspective of a historian.


A widely used textbook on research methods courses. Better than average coverage of the preliminary stages. Good checklists and summaries, exercises etc.


As the title indicates the main emphasis is on doctoral dissertations. However, contains much practical advice for anyone developing a research project.


Good general coverage.


A practical and comprehensive guide to researching, preparing and writing a literature review. Essential reading.


Visit this site for useful advice


Short, easy to read with lots of practical tips. 182 pages plus 5 useful Appendices


The book deals with every stage of project work: from inception, reading-up, gathering and analyzing data, to presenting and writing your report. A first class guide to the subject.


Good chapter on developing a research proposal.

A 'classic' but concerned primarily with doctoral dissertations.


Exactly that!


Good overall coverage of the whole process. Chapter 2 deals specifically with 'Formulating and Clarifying the Research Topic' and contains 8 pages on Research Ideas and 5 pages on Writing a Proposal.


An Open University book that offers much practical advice recognizing the limited resources available to most students.

**Appendix**

The following material is taken from David Fisher and Terry Hanstock, *Citing References*, 4th Edition, Nottingham: Library and Information Services, Nottingham Trent University and is reproduced with the permission of Terry Fisher. The full text may be found at: [http://www.ntu.ac.uk/lis/library/lisguides.htm](http://www.ntu.ac.uk/lis/library/lisguides.htm) together with a number of other very useful guides specially prepared for the use of students.

**Methods of Citation**

Let us look first at how you refer from your text to the description of the documents you are using. You need a way of identifying each source you use in your text. You will see that the **Harvard** and **Numeric** styles of citation are very different from one another.

**Harvard System**

This is by far the most straightforward way of citing references, because all you need to do is mention the author and date of publication:

*eg.*

The work of Dow (1964), Musgrave (1968) and Hansen (1969) concluded...

It has been argued (Foster 1972) that the essential...

...the results of the survey were inconclusive (see Kramer 1989).

The person reading your work can then locate the full description of the item you have cited by going to the alphabetical list of references you have provided at the end of your report, essay or dissertation.

You may need to cite more than one work by the same author published in the same year. You can do so by adding letters after the dates,
eg, Dow (1964a) and Dow (1964b).

If you are giving exact quotations from other works you should identify the page numbers,

eg, Dow (1964, p. 28).

Insertion of extra citations is no problem as the references are listed in one alphabetical sequence.

**Numeric System**

Numbers are inserted into the text which refer to a numerical sequence of references at the end of your document,

eg, Dow 7 and Jenkins 9, or Dow (7) and Jenkins (9).

You can also use numbers on their own,

eg, it can be argued 10 ... it can be argued (10).

Page numbers can either be given in your list of references, or after the numbers in your text,

eg, Dow 7 p. 27 or Dow (7 p. 27).

**Quotations**

As indicated in the above examples, whether you are using the Harvard or Numeric system, you should provide page numbers if quoting from a document in your text. There are certain other generally accepted conventions which you might like to observe, these are described below.

If you are only quoting a few words, it is usual to do the following:

eg, Jones (1989, p. 114) has challenged, what he calls, the 'peculiar assertion' by Howard that the moon is populated by librarians.

Smith (1986, p. 4) has argued "...it is simply not possible to know everything...[but] it can be stated that some knowledge is attainable.'

The quotation forms part of your text and is indicated by enclosing it thus " or " . The ... indicate omissions. Square brackets [ ] tell your reader you have added your own words to the quotation.

If you are quoting a longer passage, it is common practice for the whole quotation to be indented: eg,

Heresy requires the presence of at least a semblance of orthodoxy, a remaining vestige of an established paradigm, a doctrine or truth open to contradiction or challenge. Likewise transgression needs a limit, indeed each term evokes the other...(Smart 1993, p. 121).

The above conventions are not prescribed by national or international standards, but
have been included because they are usually adhered to by the academic community.

**Book References (Harvard System)**

A reference is the description of the source you have used. In addition to the conventions for referencing a book by a single author, we include a variety of more complex examples of works that you might need to reference. You should use the title-page rather than the cover of the book as the source of your reference. The order of the elements (including upper and lower case and punctuation) of the reference is:

**AUTHOR, Date. Title. Edition. Place : Publisher. Numeration within item** (if only a part is cited.)

**1 Single Authors**


If neither a place nor a publisher appears anywhere on the document then use:

(s.l.) to indicate place unknown (sine loco)

eg. (s.l.): Greenfield

and

(s.n.) to indicate name unknown (sine nomine)

If you do not know the publisher, you are not going to know the place either, so you will have to do the following:

(s.l.): (s.n.) But try to find publisher if at all possible!

**2 Multiple Authors**

i 3 or less


(N.B. The order in which authors are given is that of the title page.)

ii 4 or more


**3 Editors**


**Style Tips**

You must highlight titles of books using: bold type, underlining, italics etc.

You can enclose date in brackets if you wish.
eg, DOW, D., ed. (1964)
ed. is a suitable abbreviation for editor.

4 Corporate authors

5 Conferences
The first element of the reference should be the individual(s) or organisation responsible for editing the proceedings. If these cannot be traced, begin your reference with the name of the conference.
If possible, you should include the place and date of the conference.
eg,


If you need to cite an individual paper within published conference proceedings, the author of the paper becomes the first element of your reference. You should also include the page numbers of the contributed paper.
eg,


6 "In" references
These are used when citing, for example, a chapter from an edited work. The format is similar to the conference paper reference above.


7 Theses and dissertations

8 Anonymous works
If the book does not appear to have an author use 'Anon'

**9 Collaborative Works**

Encyclopedias, dictionaries and other similar publications can be referenced by the title


**Journal Article References (Harvard)**

The order of the elements (including upper and lower case and punctuation) of the reference is:

**AUTHOR, Date. Article title. Journal title, volume (part), pages.**

eg.


Multiple Authors - same rules apply as in **Book References (The Harvard System).**

Do not worry if no author is mentioned in the source of your reference. All you need to do is as follows:


**Points to note**

You should always indicate both volume and issue/part. In the above examples the numbers before the brackets refer to the volume and those inside the brackets to the part.

eg.

*Apollo*, 132 (341)

**Style Tips**

You must highlight journal title not article title. Months can be abbreviated as in the above example, Jan for January.

You can add pp. before page numbers in journal references if you wish, but it is not necessary to do so.


**Electronic Publications (Harvard)**

An increasing amount of information is becoming available in a variety of electronic formats. At the time of writing, there is little agreement as to how such works should be referenced. This section is very much our own interpretation of what we consider to be best practice. Our ideas are based upon elements drawn from a variety of sources including: the International Organization for Standardization (1997), Cross
and Towle (1996) and Li and Crane (1993 and 1997). Our own view is that electronic references are not so very different from the hardcopy formats discussed elsewhere in this booklet. The aim, as usual, is to provide sufficient information to enable others to trace the works you have consulted. As with all referencing, consistency is the key. The examples below, which are consistent with the Harvard style, are merely suggestions and are not intended to be prescriptive.

Internet Sources

i Individual Works
The order of the elements (including upper and lower case and punctuation) of the reference is:

AUTHOR or EDITOR, year. Title [online]. Place of publication: Publisher. Available at: <URL> [Accessed Date].

The term publisher may seem a little odd when talking of Internet resources. It seems usual to regard the organisation responsible for hosting the pages as the publisher. However, we view the place of publication/publisher sections as optional. As long as you supply the URL then the site can be traced. The 'accessed date' means the date you visited the site. It is important to give this as pages and their locations change with great frequency, and you are informing your readers that the information was accurate at the date stated.


If a Web page does not appear to have an author, we would recommend referencing it by title.

ii Electronic Journal Articles

AUTHOR, year. Title. Journal Title [online], volume (issue). Available at: <URL > [Accessed Date].

If you cannot discern volume/issue details simply omit them. Indicating pages can be a problem as they are often not given in electronic journals, so we suggest omitting them.


Research Online [online], 2(1). Available at: <URL:http://www.socresonline.org.uk/socresonline/2/1/2.html> [Accessed 13 June 1997].

If you are quoting from an article in an electronic journal in the body of your text, you should provide as exact a location as possible. For instance, you could give the paragraph number (if available).

Electronic Mail

i Discussion lists

AUTHOR, year. Title of message. Discussion list [online], day and month. Available at: email address or <URL> [Accessed Date].

eg, SMITH, D., 1997. UK unemployment definition/figures. European-Sociologist [online], 13 June. Available at: mailbase@mailbase.ac.uk [Accessed 16 June 1997].

Or


ii Personal email

AUTHOR, (email address) year. Title of email, day and month. Email to: recipient's name (email address).

Referencing personal emails, like any personal correspondence, is probably not something you are likely to need to do very often. But, as most sources we have consulted cover them, we thought it would be remiss of us not to include them.

eg, HIGGINS, J., (Jeff.Higgins@univ.ac.uk) 1996. Email is fun. 20 June. Email to: Peter Smith (Pete.Smith@amb.ac.uk).

References


INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR STANDARDIZATION, 1997. Excerpts


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