

Reviewing Literature: Piece of Cake?

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1. INTRODUCTION

As I was preparing for this presentation, this metaphor (a metaphor means the comparison of unlike things) between making cakes and carrying out literature reviews came to my mind and I thought I would share it with you. I have often advised students on carrying out literature reviews in their work individually but I have never made a presentation in general about reviewing literature to an audience from different disciplines; nor indeed do many of the books on research methodology I glanced through do this - they skip discussing this step of research though they list it as a component of the research process – not surprisingly given that they too to be marketable are addressing ‘the social sciences’ in general.

Why do I feel that carrying out a literature review is like making a cake? Well neither comes easy to the novice but in general following a recipe makes it easier to make a cake that is edible; similarly a good work plan can assist the researcher to ensure that the literature review is acceptable to his/her supervisor, examiner and finally to readers in general.

My intention in this presentation is to share with you a recipe I have contrived (drawing on a number of sources available on the web listed at the end of this paper as well as on my own experiences as a research student at the University of Sussex with a wonderful supervisor, Prof Mike Sumner and my own attempts at supervising students over the last one and a half decades) for preparing a literature review. I think of the preparation of a literature review as a five step process that has its parallels in the cake making analogy. These five steps are discussed in detail below.

First however I present a section that addresses the issue that is central to this discussion – the issue of why researchers involve themselves in a literature review and/or why a literature review is a necessary component in a thesis. Here it is important to understand that a literature review can take many forms and are often are extremely discipline specific much as cakes may range from rich fruit cakes for Christmas to light sponge cakes for dessert. A literature review is like a cake: it has many layers, many textures and must be easily digestible. A ‘piece of cake’ is a phrase signifying something that happens

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easily and I hope at the end of this session you will feel this way about carrying out a literature review!.

2. IMPORTANCE OF A LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review is an analysis of the literature that has been published on a topic by accredited scholars and researchers. It is not merely a summary of the existing literature but a synthesis with a very clear critical and analytical role devolved on the researcher. It must go beyond being an annotated bibliography which is merely a descriptive summary of existing literature.

At the end of reading a literature review a reader should be clear as to what is known and unknown about a particular topic. For the researcher this step is very important in helping him/her identify issues that need to be examined in the study being undertaken – in some cases this may be rejecting the existing accepted ideas; in others strengthening an accepted view through further verification; or it may mean exploring the unknown starting from the known.

Purposes of a literature Review

- Identifying consensus and debates in a specific research area
- Identifying historical development of concepts
- Guiding future research
- Prevents duplication of research
- Helps identify gaps in knowledge
- Resolving conflicts amongst researchers
- To learn how others have defined and measured key concepts
- To examine the relationship between previous studies and policy
- To identify data sources and methodologies used by others
- Allows new interpretations of previous findings
- Allowing ones original work to be highlighted though acknowledging existing information/theories
- Skill creation in researchers – knowledge seeking, evaluation, critical reading, writing

3. LITERATURE REVIEW PROCESS

My recipe proposes five steps to the literature review process:

1. **Determining the Review Format** which is like taking the decision to make a cake and deciding what type of cake, of which size is appropriate
2. **Identifying sources** which is analogous to finding ways and means to get or buy the necessary ingredients
3. **Choosing relevant material** which is like weighing out and preparing the ingredients for the cake

4. **Presenting the material** which is similar to mixing the ingredients in their right proportions, in their right sequence for baking the cake and
5. **Fine tuning the review** which is the last step, like icing the cake

3.1 DETERMINING THE REVIEW FORMAT

This involves clearly understanding what sort of a research study you are involved in. This is best understood through **looking closely at your objectives**. Why are you doing this study? A clear idea of your objectives in carrying out your intended research is important in making the following decisions:

- **Comprehensiveness/focus of the literature review: Width and depth**

Consider two examples:

- Identifying a historical trend either with regard to a theoretical concept (for example measuring the tax burden) or an empirical issue (the role of women in history)
- Discussing a modern phenomenon – the digital divide by gender

What does this mean in the context of your literature review –

Firstly it will mean that essentially the literature review in the first case will necessarily be longer than that in the second;

Secondly there will be differences in focus - in the first case the focus will be on comprehensiveness – covering literature written over a long period in order to gain insights into changes in perceptions of writers/researchers over time so that a trend may be identified. Since word limits are a very real problem in such cases it will be necessary to often merely allude to studies done in different periods or often to use previous survey articles as the major source for review rather than trying to review each and every article – the stress will be on comprehensiveness – signaling the knowledge of the substance of as many existing articles as possible rather than in-depth analyses of each and every piece. In the latter case it would be the reverse – given the limited literature available it would be important to review articles in-depth; to compare and contrast the contents of such articles

- **Determining the approach**

Is your thesis focused mainly on methodology, empirical issues or policy

This determines the type of literature to be reviewed. For instance in theses focusing on policy – for example on official language policy or Samurdhi government publications including regulations and circulars should be included within the literature.

- **Multidisciplinary vs. single discipline**

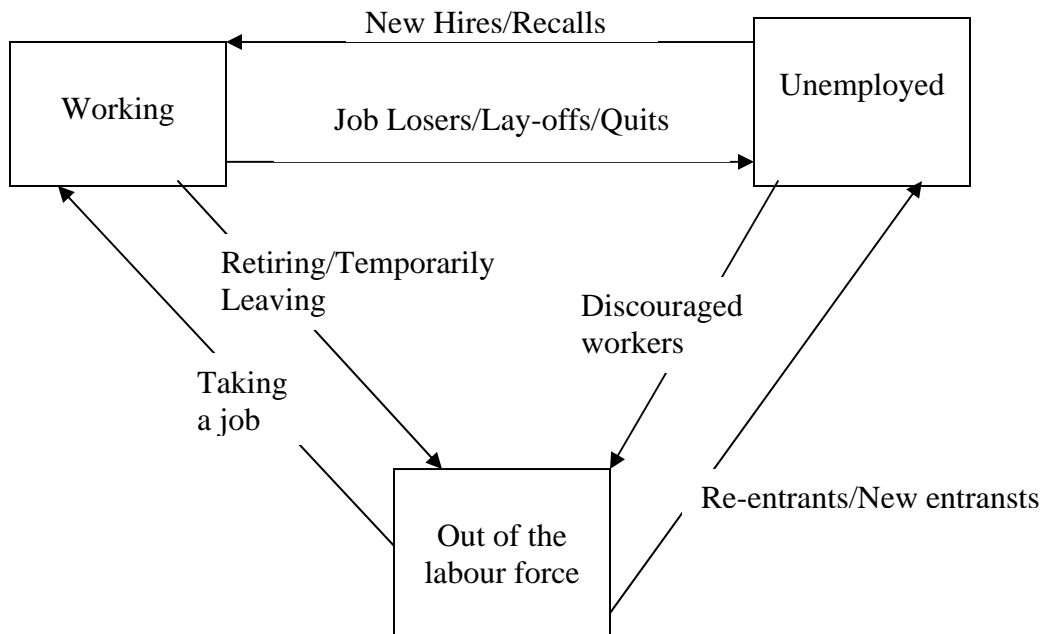
Again this depends on the chosen topic – if you are studying economic development in the Mahaweli one would necessarily have to use literature that may be primarily classified as Geography and Agriculture not merely literature from the field of Economics

- **Demarcation of relevant themes**

When we begin thinking about our chosen research area it is often like an octopus, may be even a centipede – it seems to have so many different tentacles that we would like to examine. Here it is important to limit the scope of our study because otherwise our literature review will go on for years as we pursue the different types of literature that seem to relate to our study. In this context two strategies can be useful

- 1. Use of a flow chart**

The flow chart below relates to the labour market.

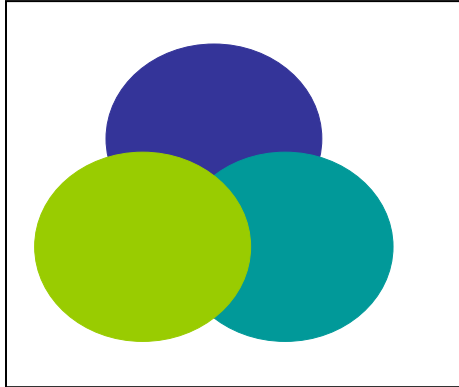


Source: Begg, Fischer and Dornbusch

The importance of this type of visual presentation is it allows us to identify clearly which aspects of a complex situation we wish to focus on in our study. It helps us to determine which tentacles to go into in-depth and which to omit entirely from our study. Remember it is your study – you can choose the approach to take – and it is possible to say in your introduction, which then limits your literature review that “while x, y and z are relevant issues given your chosen topic, they are beyond the scope of this study/thesis”. For

example when examining consumption functions in Sri Lanka from an economics perspective one can argue that intergenerational linkages are more relevant in Sri Lanka than in UK, and that therefore this should be reflected by the inclusion of zero interest loans in the consumption functions – but why intergenerational linkages are more important in Sri Lanka, the psycho-social arguments need not necessarily be included in the literature review.

2. Use of Venn diagrams



If the study you were interested in is the role of poor, urban, muslim women in development

Think of the square as representing the poor. If each of the interlocking circles were to represent urban, female, muslim then this would suggest to you the areas of interest that you would then examine through your literature review

Essentially your literature review would be limited to the poor but then you could look at the impact of the following combinations

- Urban/Muslim
- Urban/women
- Muslim/Women

and how such characteristics impact on development

before finally focusing on the central issue – the role of poor urban, muslim women in development.

▪ Degree of Technical detail

Is the objective of your study to improve/widen an existing theory or means of empirically modeling? If the answer is yes, then your literature review must focus on technical details of previous studies in your area of research.

For example if the objective of your thesis is to **develop** a consumption function capable of modeling consumption in developing countries today then not only would your literature review include previous studies done on consumption functions in developing countries but also knowledge of developments in econometrics such as co-integration that would support you as you evaluate the appropriateness of your model. On the other hand

if your objective were merely to **examine** existing consumption functions in the context of Sri Lanka, then you would not have to draw on the new developments in the field of econometrics but merely to report on consumption functions in other countries.

3.2 IDENTIFYING SOURCES

Here are some suggestions for sources through which to identify review material

1. Use of recent articles in backtracking for relevant material – use a good recognized journal – select the most recent articles relating to your topic, then go backwards finding the relevant literature; it will not only help you identify who the major authors in the field are, but also which articles are most often cited which would then suggest that they must be included to make your review complete. Remember that while most good researchers cite both sources for and against their own viewpoint some only list those that are in line with their own findings.
2. Google – this is a superb means of finding related material from different disciplines in addition to your own since you use key words to track material – or similar search engines, Using literature review/survey and words from your title may even help you find previous literature reviews/surveys
3. Citation Indexes – like medline and Soclit
4. Jstor – again the ability to use key words for tracing literature in addition to finding known relevant material
5. Lists of theses as stored in libraries
6. Speaking to experts in the field – they can often lead you to material such as reports and mimeos which you may miss
7. Conference proceedings

It is extremely important to use recent material. Now with access to the internet there is no excuse not to do so – nor can students give the usual excuse of ‘I can’t find any articles on my topic’!

3.3 CHOOSING RELEVANT MATERIAL

Choosing publications/authors

One is generally advised to use only reputed journals (often defined as refereed journals)

Now use of internet publications is acceptable in fact almost mandatory in order for the material to be current.

One needs to question the objectivity of the author, often by seeking to identify the reason for publication. Where one uses mimeos for example one needs to be skeptical about the views expressed – are these findings objective or agenda led. Similarly even in

the case of publications by international agencies one must be aware of 'agendas'. One often has to use such material in the social sciences so it is a case of presenting the material critically.

Maintaining Material

File material as one goes along keeping a careful bibliography – sometimes useful to keep three files – essential, can be used, not really relevant – that way if one changes ones mind its merely a matter of switching files not having to go searching again.

Choosing relevant material

As you read jot down the significant points – best if one has an outline of the literature review planned – sections and sub-sections. Also makes notes of which authors agree or disagree with each other – this saves time later when writing up. Some students find it helpful to use highlighter pens of different colours (colour coded for agree/disagree for example).

Constructing working hypotheses

As you go on with your reading create possible hypotheses to be examined in your literature review. This will give you a good idea of how to thematically structure your literature review.

3.4 PRESENTING THE MATERIAL

Dividing the literature review into sections and sub-sections is essential as this guides the placement of material ensuring a better flow of ideas. It also helps the reader to pick out the salient points rather than having all the material presented in long sections where he/she tends to lose track of who says what about what. It is important to prepare this organizational structure in advance so that you can keep inserting material into this structure as you read.

Your literature review section should start with an introduction – that explains how your literature review is structured to the reader. There are a number of alternative ways of organizing your literature review

- Historically – according to the actual period being discussed
- Chronologically – according to the date of publication
- Thematically
- Methodologically
- Globally to locally
- Macro to Micro

Choice depends on topic and discipline

Don't wait to start writing till you finish reading all your articles – this will only result in confusion. It is best to keep writing up as you read – you can always reorganize and improve your material as you go along.

Literature reviews could comprise of the following elements:

- Definition of key terms
- Historical development of a concept
- History – for example of a movement
- Experiences of a single country
- International experiences
- Methodology Reviews
- Current situation

Two main issues must be dealt with in presenting the material.

- Information
- Critical appraisal

In presenting the material it must not be done merely as a description of existing literature or a summary of all the articles that have preceded your own. It is extremely important that a synthesis occurs. What does this mean? It means that you must compare and contrast the material in different articles/books – highlight the similarities and differences of the techniques adopted as well as the conclusions.

Take the following topic as an example:

The causes of rural and urban poverty are different; so are the solutions.

If you were to present the material relating to the literature review in the following order

- Causes of urban poverty
- Solutions to urban poverty
- Causes of rural poverty
- Solutions to rural poverty

Then you would be merely summarizing the findings of different studies.

Alternatively you could present the same material as

- Causes of urban poverty
- Causes of rural poverty
- Similar causes – similar solutions
- Similar causes – different solutions
- Urban specific causes and solutions
- Rural specific causes and solutions

This would then clearly involve synthesizing material as well as summarizing relevant material under specific headings.

It must be clear when and where you agree with or disagree with the methodology used or the conclusions reached by one or both authors; or where you are merely skeptical. If you are unhappy about the sample size used by an author, or the econometric tests used to verify a finding this must be clearly stated in your literature review. If you don't, then you are implicitly accepting that author's conclusions without any questioning of its validity and this may reflect poor judgment on your part.

In assessing an article

- What are the author's credentials – this is not merely academic credentials – but does the author know the language he is commenting on for example? Has he visited the country he is commenting on?
- Are the author's arguments supported by the views of others?
- Are the author's views supported by empirical evidence?
- Is the methodology used sound
- Has the author convincingly presented his case? Does the conclusion really emerge from the findings?
- Is the author prejudiced? Has some relevant information/findings been withheld or ignored?
- Are there gaps in the work?
- Does the author's work go beyond previous research? Has he/she made a contribution?

Be aware of the difference between quoting and paraphrasing. Accurate quotation and citation extremely important

3.5 FINE TUNING THE LITERATURE REVIEW

1. A literature review is never complete – one tends to keep adding to it as one goes through the research process – however one must also desist from the n+1 syndrome – that is at some point one must stop adding new material or the thesis will never get submitted.
2. If you have been working intensively on the literature review put it aside for a week – then return to it with a critical mind as if it were written by someone else – is the flow of arguments clearly presented? This will help you strengthen the links between paragraphs and to sharpen the arguments/comparisons.
3. Have you used technical words – these should be supported by footnotes.
4. Have you used jargon – if a word is not clear to the average reader your argument will be lost – so avoid jargon. If you coin words, then define them clearly; if you use another researchers jargon then be sure to acknowledge it.
5. Check that all names are spelt properly.
6. Decide on either UK or US English and stick to that consistently.
7. Check that all referencing is properly done.
8. Prepare your bibliography as you go along (don't be left looking for "that red book by somebody Jonathan that I found on the 3rd shelf of this bookshelf two years later as you rush to submit your thesis!)

Reference List

<http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/litrev.html>

http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/literature_review.html

<http://www.library.cqu.edu.au/tutorials/litreviewpages/tips.htm>

<http://library.ucsc.edu/ref/howto/litretaurereview.html>

<http://www.library.ncat.edu/ref/guides/literaturereview03.htm>