

## Principles to inform the literature review

Once your literature search has given you a sense of the field, you will have to start to make choices about:

- where to focus the rest of your search
- what to follow up in depth
- what to include in your written review.

The following principles can help to make this part of the process more manageable.

### Become increasingly focused

As you become clearer about your likely topic, your reading should become increasingly:

- specialist in content
- relevant to your title
- reflective about what you are finding and how this might be useful to you
- analytical and critical of the material you are considering for inclusion.

### Include specialist material

Read at least some material that has been published in specialist journals, conference papers or as monographs. Look out for what is at the cutting edge of research in your subject. This is an area where your supervisor should be able to provide good leads for you to follow up.

As such material is written for experts, it can be difficult to read at first. If so, it can help to:

- read some general background first
- make use of any available reviews of the research, in journals or online.

For seminal research (that is, work which had a fundamental influence in the field), there will be many texts that provide background, explanations and analyses that you can draw upon.

### Demonstrate your understanding

When considering what to include in your literature review, be careful to make choices that enable you to demonstrate that you have:

- a breadth of understanding of the field; this will be revealed partly through the intelligent way that you discuss the literature and also in the breadth of your references
- a depth of understanding of your specialist topic; this will be indicated by the kinds of specialist material to which you refer
- a good grasp of what is the most significant, and what is less so; this will be reflected in both your choices of what to include and the use you make of the material.

### Be selective

As you read, start to make decisions about how, exactly, you will make use of the material in your own work. Ask yourself such questions as:

- Am I really going to use this at all?
- To which section, chapters, or themes of my work does it relate?
- Am I going to agree with it or challenge it?
- What do I want to say about it?
- Just how important is it compared with other things that I am reading?
- Is there a short quotation that I want to use from it? Will I be paraphrasing any section of it? Will I just be alluding to it in passing?

### Decide on how much you will use

Consider whether you will refer to the material:

- simply as a passing reference (which will be the case for most of what you read)
- in a sentence, for more significant pieces of work
- in several sentences, if especially important
- in one or more paragraphs, if the research is really of exceptional importance and if your word limit permits.

The checklists on page 85 can help to focus your thinking about if, and how, to make use of material in your own work.



## Selecting material to include

CHECKLIST

### Clarify your purpose

As you uncover new material, make decisions about what to read, note or include in your own work – for what purpose and at what depth.

- 1 Purpose.** How, specifically, will you draw upon it in your research? In which section of your report or dissertation will you refer to it?
- 2 Depth of coverage.** How much will you write about it? Just briefly in passing, such as part of a list of citations? A line or two? In greater depth?

### Using the checklist below

If it isn't immediately obvious why, how and where you would make use of material, browse through the following checklist to focus your decision-making.

It isn't likely that you would need to use this checklist for everything you read. The left-hand column helps decide how you would use it; the right-hand column how much to include.

#### Checklist: How would I use this material?

##### 1 Purpose

Indicate ☒ all uses that apply.

I would use this material to:

- ☐ indicate a key phase in the development of previous research in my field
- ☐ draw attention to developments in, or limitations of, the theoretical base
- ☐ identify developments or limitations in the methodologies used for researching the topic
- ☐ show how my own research will draw on insights from its methodology or make use of its methods
- ☐ make reference to its findings
- ☐ demonstrate how it has contributed to the evidence base that I am drawing upon
- ☐ draw upon its critique of relevant research, methods, theory, or interpretations of findings
- ☐ show how it contributed to the general understanding of issues relevant to my project
- ☐ replicate the work or test out an aspect of the research for myself
- ☐ build further on that research in a particular way
- ☐ illustrate a point that I am trying to make
- ☐ indicate how it supports, or contradicts, my own findings or conclusions.

##### 2 Depth of coverage

I would make reference to this piece of material ...

- ☐ Just in passing?
- ☐ In about a sentence?
- ☐ As a short paragraph?
- ☐ In several paragraphs?

Add any other ways you would use it.