What is a literature review?

A literature review is a well-organised discussion of published (and sometimes unpublished) research and scholarship relevant to an area of study. The literature review demonstrates that the student has acquired a full professional grasp of their research area. A good literature review also puts forward an argument for the research that will be done; it points the way towards future work. The literature review will
continue to develop as the research progresses. Eventually it will probably form a chapter in the thesis.

Format

- Are the aims/ goals of the literature review included in the introduction?
- Is the research focus made clear/
- How well is the literature review structured?
- Are the headings/ sub-headings used appropriately to help the reader navigate the subject area?
- Is there a conclusion to the review?
- Are main points summarised and future research directions suggested?

Content

- Is the nature of the material reviewed appropriate?
- Are important authors /research papers included in the review?
- Is the coverage of the literature sufficient … for the moment?
- Are there any key items/ areas overlooked?
- Has the work been synthesised – does it provide a coherent representation of the field? Or is the review pointing to previous work in a disconnected manner?
- Has a critical approach to the literature been taken (identifying important contributions, comparisons, strengths and weaknesses)?
- Does the review show appropriate depth of thinking for the degree being undertaken?

Presentation and Expression

- Is the quality of English expression and punctuation of appropriate standard?
- Has the chosen referencing system been used correctly?

Characteristics of Strong and Weak Literature Reviews

Areas in which literature reviews are commonly deficient include:

- exclusion of landmark studies
- emphasis on outdated material
- adopting a parochial perspective
- not being critical
- not discriminating between relevant and irrelevant material
- lacking synthesis

The literature review is the second most frequent chapter of the thesis to be criticised by examiners. Common criticisms:

- failure to use recent literature
- lack of critical assessment

- not relating the literature review to the research questions or hypotheses
- incorrectly interpreting sources

How to improve

- include current literature as well as material of historical interest
- aims of the review are clearly stated
- the range of resources from which literature has been gathered are identified
- a breadth of knowledge of the area is demonstrated
- a strong argument is developed justifying the nature of the recommended line of research
- organisation and structure of the review are made clear to reader
- the review should be interesting to read

The material above is based on research and scholarship by:
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