

7 Developing and Presenting Your Literature Review

Chapter 7 Objectives

Section I: Instruction

- Provide an understanding of the function and purpose of a literature review (the “what”).
- Describe the role of a research-based critical literature review in a dissertation (the “why”).
- Outline the skills related to the various steps involved in conducting and presenting a thorough and systematic review of the literature, including identifying and retrieving relevant material and sources, as well as analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing ideas found in the literature (the “how”).
- Offer a thorough appreciation of the nature, role, structure, and function of a theoretical or conceptual framework and explain its development and application based on qualitative research principles.
- Explain the significance of alignment between research problem, research questions, research findings, literature review, and theoretical or conceptual framework.

Section II: Application

- Present a completed example for the literature review chapter of a dissertation.

Overview

This chapter provides a guide to what some see as one of the most daunting tasks involved in writing a dissertation—that of reviewing topic-specific literature. A dissertation demonstrates your ability to write a coherent volume of intellectually demanding work. A key part of the dissertation that illustrates your scholarship is the way in which you have analyzed, organized, and reported the relevant literature. With thoughtful preparation, careful planning of your work and time, and helpful guidelines, this *is* a manageable task.

In conducting a literature review, you are forced to think critically and consider the role of argument in research. Thus, reviewing the literature is research in and of itself. Because a dissertation is really about demonstrating your ability to conduct and carry out a research project, our intent throughout this book is to help you understand what it means to be a researcher. With regard to the literature review chapter, an underlying assumption is that if you can understand the ideas and master the techniques and methods inherent in the literature review, this will be helpful to you in your own research.

Often students put off doing the literature review because they do not fully understand its purpose and function, or they are unsure of the procedures to follow in conducting a literature search. In this chapter, we attempt to address both of these issues. We also address the theoretical or conceptual framework as an integral element of the research process and provide detailed explanation regarding how to develop this framework, where it would be introduced in the dissertation, and how it functions in analysis. Once you have completed your literature review, you may want to refer to Appendix B: Rubric for Evaluating a Literature Review.

This chapter is divided into two sections. Section I, “Instruction,” discusses the purpose and function of the literature review; the role the literature review plays in a dissertation, pointing out possible differences with respect to the different qualitative traditions; and the actual steps involved in conducting and presenting a thorough and systematic literature review. The section also includes discussion around structure and function of the theoretical or conceptual framework. Section II, “Application,” demonstrates how to organize and write an actual literature review chapter. Here we focus on the specific problem as outlined in Chapter 1, and using this as an example, we explain and illustrate how to develop the associated literature review and conceptual framework.

Section I: Instruction

Function and Purpose of the Literature Review

The review of related literature involves the systematic identification, location, and analysis of material related to the research problem. This material can include books, book chapters, articles, abstracts, reviews, monographs, dissertations, research reports, and electronic media. A key objective of the literature review is to provide a clear and balanced picture of current leading concepts, theories, and data relevant to your topic or subject of study. The material, although consisting of what has been searched, located, obtained, and read, is not merely a simplistic summative description of the contents of articles and books, nor is it a series of isolated summaries of previous studies. Your readers are being asked to view this literature review as representing the sum of the current knowledge on the topic, as well as your ability to think critically about it.

Areas of inquiry within disciplines exist as ongoing conversations among authors and theorists. By way of your literature review, you join the conversation—first by listening to what is being said and then by formulating a comment designed to advance the dialogue. The literature review thus involves locating and assimilating what is already known and then entering the conversation from a critical and creative standpoint. As Torracco (2005) defines it, “The integrative literature review is a form of research that reviews, critiques, and synthesizes representative literature on a topic in an integrated way such that new frameworks and perspectives on the topic are generated” (p. 356). Ultimately, your review “tells a story” by critically analyzing the literature and arriving at specific conclusions about it. Developing a scholarly literature review utilizing academic writing is a vital component of your research process—and of your dissertation. Engaging in this critical review contextualizes your study and includes several interrelated processes and goals:

- Trace the etiology or history of the specific fields and topics related to your study.
- Cultivate familiarity with and expertise in specific areas of knowledge, including issues and debates in the field.

- Become familiar with and learn more about the specific vocabulary, terminology, and concepts in the field of interest.
- Identify key theories or concepts related to the phenomenon and/or context under study, and which of these will most appropriately frame and situate your study.
- Identify factors and influences related to the phenomenon and/or context to be studied.
- Offer new and possibly innovative perspectives regarding conceptualization of the research topic.
- Offer new and possibly innovative perspectives regarding development and/or refinement of research questions.
- Assist with developing an argument for the rationale and significance of your research

In order for a literature review to support your research, you will need to examine and articulate various aspects of relevant peer-reviewed literature in an integrated and critical way, making central connections, and asking the kind of questions that will shed new light on key issues related to your phenomenon of study. The importance of including peer-reviewed literature cannot be stressed enough. Journals and academic papers play an essential role in the dissemination and sharing of knowledge within and beyond the academic community, including with stakeholders who may be involved in commissioning the research. To ensure quality with these publications, journal editors require that the work is peer reviewed. The advantage of the peer-review process is that reviewers provide feedback to editors and writers regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the manuscript, which enhances the credibility and quality of the research that is published.

A literature review requires a technical form of writing in which facts must be documented and opinions substantiated. Producing a good literature review requires time and intellectual effort. It is a test of your ability to manage the relevant texts and materials, analytically interpret ideas, and integrate and synthesize ideas and data with existing knowledge. One of the ways to improve your writing is to read as widely as possible. Look for examples of good and bad writing. Try to identify ways in which other authors have structured and built their arguments, as well as the methods and techniques they have used to express their ideas.

Academic writing requires continual practice with rereading and revisions before submitting it to faculty for feedback. Dissertations and peer-reviewed articles have all undergone multiple reviews and revisions by others before being finalized or published. Part of becoming an independent scholar is openly accepting and engaging within this revision process as a method to continually improve academic writing skills. As doctoral studies are ongoing, skills and new learning will be required to become an independent scholar capable of creating knowledge rather than being only a consumer of knowledge. This process involves learning about and appreciating the iterative and collaborative nature of academic writing. Part of being a successful academic scholar is the ability to provide as well as be open to receiving critical feedback on scholarly research and the development of your academic writing. Remember, critical feedback within the research process is not meant to be a personal criticism; rather, it is designed to indicate areas in need of clarity as well as improvements in content, design, and analysis, thereby elevating the level of your academic writing to produce clear, accurate, concise, and grammatically correct written discussions.

Role and Scope of the Literature Review in the Dissertation

The major purpose of reviewing the literature is to determine what has already been done that relates to your topic. This knowledge not only prevents you from unintentionally duplicating research that has already been conducted, but it also affords you the understanding and insight needed to situate your topic within an existing framework. As Boote and Beile (2005) explain,

A substantive, thorough, sophisticated literature review is a precondition for doing substantive, thorough, sophisticated research. “Good” research is good because it advances our collective understanding. To advance our collective understanding, a researcher or scholar needs to understand what has been done before, the strengths and weaknesses of existing studies, and what they might mean. (p. 3)

A review of the literature enables you to acquire a full understanding of your topic; what has been already said about it; how ideas related to your topic have been researched, applied, and developed; the key issues surrounding your topic; and the main criticisms that have been made regarding work on your topic. Therefore, a thorough search and reading of related literature is, in a very real sense, part of your own academic development—part of becoming an “expert” in your chosen field of inquiry.

It is incumbent on you, as the researcher, to find out what already exists in the area in which you propose to do research before doing the research. You need to know about the contributions that others have made relative to your topic because this prior work, as well as current research and debate, will provide you with the framework for your own work. In reviewing the literature, areas of concentrated interest, as well as areas of relative neglect, will become apparent, and so you will begin to identify a “space” for your own work. You also will gain a deeper understanding of the interrelationships and intersections between the subject under consideration and other subject areas. Therefore, a review of the literature allows you to get a grip on what is known and to learn where the “holes” are in the current body of knowledge. A review of the literature also enables you to recognize previously reported concepts or patterns, refer to already established explanations or theories, and recognize any variations between what was previously discovered and what you are now finding as a result of your study.

Qualitative researchers typically use existing literature to guide their studies in various ways depending on the type of study being conducted. Depending on the research tradition you have adopted, there are subtle differences in the interplay between prior knowledge and discovery. As such, there are differences regarding the purpose and process for planning the research design and presenting the review of the literature with respect to each of the research traditions. There are some general guidelines regarding whether the literature is referred to *before* asking questions and data collection or *after* data collection and data analysis. For example, in a phenomenological study, the literature is reviewed primarily following data collection so that the information in the literature does not preclude the researcher from being able to “bracket” or suspend preconceptions. If conducting a grounded theory study, some literature review is conducted initially to place the study in context and to inform the researcher of what has been done in the field. The main literature review is conducted *during* concept development, however, because the literature is used to define the concepts and further define and clarify the relationships in the theory developed from the empirical data. In grounded theory, the literature becomes a source for data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). When categories have been found, the researcher trawls the literature for confirmation or refutation of these categories. The objective is to ascertain what other researchers have found and whether there are any links to existing theories. In conducting an ethnographic study,

the literature is reviewed before data are collected, serving as a background for the research question and informing the researcher as to what will be studied and how it will be studied. With narrative inquiry and case study, both “before” and “after” approaches are employed: An initial review is conducted after the development of the research question to shape the direction of the study, and the literature also is reviewed on an ongoing basis throughout the study to compare and contrast with the data that have emerged and the study’s theoretical or conceptual framework.

No matter which qualitative tradition or genre you have adopted, the review of related literature is more than just a stage to be undertaken and a hurdle to be overcome. Right from the beginning, literature review is an essential, integral, and ongoing part of the research process. At the initial stages, a preliminary search and analysis of the literature is usually necessary to focus on a researchable topic and evaluate its relevance. It is the progressive honing of the topic, by way of the literature review, that makes most research a practical consideration. Having done that and having developed a narrowly defined problem statement, you then set or situate your problem within a context. To do this, it is important to consult the literature to see whether the study’s problem has been addressed and how and to what extent the issues surrounding the problem have been addressed. Being familiar with previous research facilitates interpretation of your study’s findings because the latter will need to be discussed in terms of whether and how they relate to the findings of previous studies. If your findings contradict previous findings, you can describe the differences between your study and the others, providing a rationale for the discrepancies. However, if your findings are consistent with other findings, your report could include suggestions for future research to shed light on the relevant issues.

Besides providing a foundation—a theoretical or conceptual framework for the problem to be investigated—the literature review can demonstrate how the present study advances, refines, or revises what is already known. Knowledge of previous studies offers a point of reference for discussing the contribution that your study will make in advancing the knowledge base. As such, the literature review is a conscious attempt to keep in mind that the dissertation research emerges from and is contained within a larger context of educational inquiry. The literature that describes the context frames the problem; it provides a useful backdrop for the problem or issue that has led to the need for the study. The literature review also can assist you in refining your research questions. Furthermore, previous studies can provide the rationale for your research problem, and indications of what needs to be done can help you justify the significance of your study.

Aside from the formal review of related and relevant literature of Chapter 2 of the dissertation, which demonstrates that you show command of your subject area and an understanding of the research problem, you will more generally need to conduct reviews of the literature at various stages of the dissertation process. As a qualitative researcher, you will also need to demonstrate the ability to assess the methodologies that you will be using in your research. This type of assessment is necessary to display a clear and critical understanding of how you will be conducting your study and why you have chosen to conduct it that way. The aim of the methodology chapter is to indicate the appropriateness of the various design features of your research, including your research approach and the specific methodology employed. In this regard, relevant references from the literature are necessary to illustrate the respective strengths and weaknesses of each of the data collection methods you intend to employ. The actual literature review writing process is therefore cyclical, iterative, and ongoing. While developing your literature review, additional sources may need to be identified. This means returning to searching the literature, analyzing the findings, and integrating this information into the literature review. Similarly, remaining current with the research in the area of interest may lead to incorporating additional sources. It is important to realize that the literature review does not formally end once you have written your introductory and literature review chapters but carries over into subsequent chapters as well. The literature review process is therefore ongoing throughout the entire dissertation process, up until completion.

You might be asking, “What is the scope of a literature review?” Just how much literature you will need to cover is a difficult question to answer. Aside from the inclusion of seminal literature and landmark studies, keeping the literature current is important so that the study remains relevant and meaningful. As a general rule of thumb, a literature review should represent the most current work undertaken in a subject area, and usually a 5-year span from the present is a tentative limit of coverage at most institutions, although this is something you will need to check with your chair or department. For historical overviews, however, you might reach beyond the 5-year span. The following general guidelines can assist you:

- Avoid the temptation to include everything. Bigger is not necessarily better. A concise, well-organized literature review that contains relevant information is preferable to a review containing many studies that are only peripherally related to your research problem.
- When investigating a heavily researched and well-developed area, review only those works that are directly related to your specific research problem.
- When investigating a new or little-researched problem area, gather enough information to develop and establish a logical framework for your study. Therefore, review all studies related in some meaningful way to your research problem.

As you continue reviewing the relevant and appropriate literature, you will know when you have reached a saturation point when you begin to encounter the same references and can no longer find any new sources. Generally speaking, a literature chapter is usually between 30 and 50 pages. However, this number depends, to a large extent, on the complexity of your study and the requirements of your school or program. Therefore, take time to clarify this prior to writing the review.

Remember, because you are attempting to provide a comprehensive and up-to-date review of your selected areas, it is important to revisit the literature review toward the end of your study to make sure no new research has been overlooked. This step is especially important if much time has passed since you wrote the original literature review for your proposal. Thus, as your study comes to a close, it may be necessary to conduct a new literature search to make sure that all new studies conducted since you wrote the original literature review are included. Moreover, as we remind you in Part III of this book, the literature review is an important early task. Once you complete your study, you need to reread your literature review and ensure that everything therein is directly relevant to your study. Based on your findings and the analysis and interpretation of those findings, whatever is deemed irrelevant should be eliminated. Equally important, if a section of literature review is missing, it will need to be added.

Preparing for the Literature Review

Developing a literature review can appear to be a daunting task, but it can be successfully accomplished through an organized and methodological approach rather than attempting to quickly complete it. The activities required to develop a literature review are part of an interconnected cyclical process involving searching literature, identifying and organizing the sources, reviewing the sources and recording notes, critically evaluating the material, synthesizing information, and writing the article review. Searching, reading, and writing are all connected and support one another throughout the process of developing the literature review. Finding relevant material for a comprehensive literature review involves multiple strategies and a wide variety of sources. As such, it is important that you become familiar with your institution’s library. You should check on what services your library provides, how to access these services, and the regulations and procedures regarding the use of library services and materials.

Peer-reviewed materials other than books, such as journals and conference papers, are generally obtainable through your library databases. This step is where your university library becomes an especially useful and efficient resource. Through their subscription to these databases, libraries have become gateways to information, and technological advancements have opened up a range of new possibilities to researchers. Some of the more commonly used electronic library databases for the social sciences are presented as Appendix C. There are a few hundred databases that can link you to the relevant scholarly publications. Each database has its own unique features; familiarizing yourself with these features will enable you to access and conduct electronic searches. Once accessed, you can search according to your topic of interest and obtain either abstracts or full-text articles. Search processes are not necessarily the same across all databases. The art of database searching involves learning how to input terms that will connect you with the material most related to your topic. Because database formats change frequently, you should check with librarians for recent information regarding new tools or strategies included in the latest versions of the databases.

Aside from online searches, you also should spend time in the library getting used to call numbers related to your topic in order to find the appropriate sections. To produce a comprehensive literature review, you have to be thorough. Many sources that are needed for review are not available online. Conducting a literature search using only online sources might mean that you miss some critical information.

Retrieval and review have their own set of requisite technical skills. A comprehensive literature search on a topic involves managing databases, references, and records. A common thread running through the discussion of the various stages involved in conducting a literature review is how to manage and organize information, materials, and ideas. Table 7.1 shows the various steps involved in constructing a well-developed literature review. Following is a more detailed explanation of each of the steps involved.

TABLE 7.1 Road Map for Conducting the Literature Review

1: Identify and Retrieve Literature

- Search library catalogs or library stacks.
- Familiarize yourself with online databases and identify those that are relevant for your field of study.
- Develop parameters that will yield focused results by selecting pertinent keywords or descriptors and specifying a limited range of publication dates (go back 5–10 years).
- Try out general descriptors and various combinations of subdescriptors. In this way, your search is refined, and all possible yields are covered.
- Search the Internet for relevant information and resources, making sure to include only reliable sources of information.
- From all the sources that you use, try to obtain both theoretical and empirical (research-based) literature.
- Make sure to seek peer-reviewed literature including primary and secondary sources.
- Identify and include any relevant classic works and landmark studies related to your topic.
- Seek review articles that provide “state of the art” scholarship on a particular topic. In other words, review as much up-to-date work as possible so that your review remains current.
- In collecting literature, be prepared to refine your topic more narrowly.
- Keep control: From the beginning, develop a system for recording and managing material.
- At the end of the study, revisit online databases to check for any new literature that may have emerged.

2: Review and Critically Analyze Literature

- Look for essential components in the literature.
- Extract and record information by asking systematic questions of the literature.
- Develop an analytic format and use it consistently. A concept map may be helpful in this regard.
- Write a short overview report on each piece of literature reviewed, including specific detailed information. These are your annotations, which become your annotated bibliography, and this assists with digesting scholarly literature.
- For research articles, extract technical elements and establish tables or matrices.
- While analyzing the specifics, be on the lookout for broader themes and issues.

3: Synthesis: Write the Review

- Organize separate elements as one integrated, creative whole.
- Determine the patterns that have emerged, such as trends, similarities, and contradictions/contrasts.
- Identify themes and translate them into corresponding headings and subheadings.
- Write a first draft.
- Ensure that your argument flows logically and coherently, that it is written clearly, and that it is well supported by citations.
- Test the draft by inviting/soliciting feedback from colleagues and advisors.
- Edit, revise, and refine, incorporating feedback from others.

4: Develop and Present a Theoretical or Conceptual Framework

- Develop the framework as an integral part of your study. It is a repository for the findings as well as a tool for analysis. As such, careful development is essential.
- Establish categories that are directly tied to each of the research questions.
- Develop descriptors for each category that are based on the literature, pilot study findings, and personal “hunches.”
- Be prepared to refine and revise your conceptual framework as the study progresses.
- The framework can be presented in narrative and/or diagrammatic form.

Source: This chart first appeared in Bloomerg, L. D. (2007). *Understanding qualitative inquiry: Content and process* (Part I). Unpublished manuscript.

Step 1: Identify and Retrieve Literature

Conducting a literature search requires time management, organization, and conscientious note taking. Establishing a schedule to sufficiently search the literature, organize the identified sources, and record clear notes about the obtained information will assist in a comprehensive understanding of the existing research literature. The recorded notes will assist with categorizing the obtained information to identify concepts and themes in preparation for developing the literature review. Ensure that your notes are clear and comprehensive, as these will create the foundation for the development of the literature review.

The literature review process involves locating and assimilating what is already known. To do this, the writer must experience what Fanger (1985) describes as “immersion in the subject” by reading extensively in areas that either directly or indirectly relate to the topic under study. To begin, you need to select available documents, published and unpublished, on the topic. Through your search, you will begin to identify the relevant classic works and landmark studies, as well as the most current work available.

Primary source documents contain the original work of researchers and authors. These sources contain firsthand information, meaning that you are reading the author’s own account of a specific topic. Examples include scholarly research articles, books, diaries, speeches, manuscripts, interviews, records, and audio and video sources. Secondary sources describe, summarize, or discuss information or details that are originally presented in another source. Secondary sources are written by authors who *interpret* the work of others, including abstracts, indexes, reviews, encyclopedias, magazine articles, almanacs, popular journal articles, commentaries, and textbooks. Also included among secondary sources are wikis and websites. Secondary sources are useful because they combine knowledge from many primary sources and provide a quick way to obtain an overview of a field or topic. They also are a useful resource for obtaining other sources of information related to your research topic. At the same time, secondary sources cannot always be considered completely reliable, and this is something you will need to determine. As such, as a serious graduate researcher, you should not rely solely on these but should base your review on primary sources as much as possible.

Remember, too, that seminal works are integral to your research. Sometimes referred to as pivotal or landmark studies, seminal works present an idea of great importance or significance, and so they are cited and referred to time and time again in the research. Seminal work may emerge naturally as you progress in your search. But identification of seminal work also relies on your own thoroughness in the examination and synthesis of scholarly literature. It is important to keep in mind that seminal studies may have been published quite some time ago. Therefore, limiting a database search to the past 5 years, for example, may exclude seminal studies from your results. To avoid overlooking pivotal research that may have occurred in years past, it is recommended that you not use a date limiter in your literature search. As you proceed in your search, note which authors are making significant contributions to increasing the knowledge base with regard to your chosen topic. In addition to seeking primary material, you might want to revisit the earlier studies of these writers to note the development of their theory or ideas. As mentioned previously, the use of peer-reviewed material is essential, as this ensures that you are including literature that has been critically evaluated and is therefore considered credible.

A Comprehensive Search Process

In preparation to conduct research, a comprehensive literature search is needed to identify as many possible sources relevant to the chosen topic. This information will facilitate an in-depth understanding of the existing related research, helping to understand what has been concluded and what still needs to be researched. Completing a thorough review of the peer-reviewed literature will allow the identification of potential areas of inquiry as well as increase the understanding of important concepts and theories related to the chosen topic. At this stage, the literature search is exploratory, allowing the research topic to be more clearly understood, developed, and then focused. The goal is to become an informed consumer of research to be capable of becoming a creator of needed knowledge by completing the dissertation.

The retrieval effort consists of a series of stages:

Stage 1: Use keywords and combinations of keywords (descriptors) to identify potential sources: Using various combinations of keywords maximizes the possibility of locating articles relevant to your planned study. Seek and make records of citations that seem to be relevant to your topic.

Stage 2: Skim and screen the sources: Assess each piece of literature to ascertain whether the content is relevant to your study.

Stage 3: Acquisition: Print documents that are available electronically. In some cases, only an abstract is available. In those cases where the material seems relevant, you need to obtain the full-text document. Check out books; copy articles from journals and chapters from books; and if material is unavailable through your own library, order interlibrary loans.

A comprehensive literature search on a topic that covers all the necessary sources and resources is a demanding and rigorous process. It is seldom possible to find all the information required within the space of a few weeks. Often, initial search strategies may not reveal what you are looking for; therefore, you will need to search more widely in the databases and also make use of more complex combinations of words and phrases. Proceed with persistence, flexibility, and tenacity. Persistence means being thorough in your search and keeping detailed records of how you have managed your search activities.

Following are some organizing strategies to assist you in the identification and retrieval process:

1. Because you will return to the library databases time and again to continue your review, it would be wise to develop a system of keeping track of keywords (descriptors) and combinations of keywords you have used. In the dissertation, you will have to report on how the literature was selected and what procedures were used to select the material, so keeping a record of this information is important.
2. It is also important to keep track of each book or document that you consult. In this regard, you should keep diligent bibliographic citations. You will save much time by writing each reference in its proper form initially. There are various software programs available such as EndNote (www.endnote.com), RefWorks (www.refworks.com), Zotero (www.zotero.org), and ProCite (www.procite.com) that enable you to create a list of bibliographic references. These online research management, writing, and collaboration tools are designed to help researchers easily gather, manage, store, and share all types of information, as well as generate citations and bibliographies. Endnote integrates well with most library search engines. Zotero automatically creates references from uploaded PDF files, which means you are storing the references and research in the same place, which is convenient and useful.
3. You may prefer to maintain an ongoing alphabetically arranged, accurate record by way of a Word document; many times, this way is the easiest and most efficient. We suggest that you prepare a typed list of each piece of literature reviewed, making sure that all details (authors, titles, dates, volume numbers, page numbers, etc.) are correct. This list then becomes a working draft of your references. To avoid the frustration of having to search for information at a later stage (and possibly not being able to track it down),

keep a close check on this list, making sure not to inadvertently omit any details as you go along. If the reference is a book, be sure to include the library call number because you may need to return to it later. This list will encompass all materials that you have retrieved and thus will have some bearing on your study. In the final version of your dissertation, you will include only a reference list, not a bibliography—that is, not all the reading you may have done but only a list of those texts that are cited in the body of the manuscript.

4. Collecting literature is an ongoing process. You need to develop some system for classifying sources into those that have a direct bearing on your topic and those that are more peripherally related to your topic. You need to be selective in choosing material most relevant to your study. Always keep in mind the problem that your study is addressing. As you gather and sort material, ask yourself how and in what ways the material relates to your research problem. You might categorize each piece of material as *very important*, *moderately important*, or *mildly important*. After locating pertinent material for review, you should store these files, especially those that are central to your topic and that you think you might cite. When possible, you should save material electronically to allow for efficient and easy retrieval.

Exploring and Evaluating Web Resources

Although not scholarly, the Internet will more than likely be your initial starting point for topic ideas and information. Start by searching for some of the keywords related to your area of interest to begin a very broad scan of the range of topics and information sources. Use keywords such as *trending news* or *trending topics*, *recent research*, *controversial issues*, *policy debates*, and other relevant terms to locate recent news. With the tremendous amount of information available via electronic media, it is crucial that you learn to access this information. However, anyone anywhere can put information on the web, so any information from the Internet should be cited with caution. Remember that using the Internet to find academic information takes a lot of hard work to carefully evaluate and determine whether a web resource is reliable, authoritative, or even scholarly.

The Internet has made it possible for anyone to publish web pages. Most websites have not undergone a review process for inclusion in a collection. For these reasons, you should closely evaluate any Internet resources you find to ensure they contain balanced, factual information. One of the key purposes of evaluating online resources is to judge how trustworthy or reliable they are if you intend to use and cite them. A second purpose is to identify the sort of information that is immediately obvious in print publication—that is, information about the publisher and author. Reliable Internet resources may include peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, conference papers, industry and professional standards, scientific papers, news reports, and quick facts and figures. However, keep in mind that just because a website is well presented does not mean that it contains accurate information. Following are a few things you can look for in Internet resources to determine whether or not they are reliable sources of information.

1. Can you identify the author of an Internet resource? Is it clear who is responsible for the document? If so, is there any information about the person or organization responsible for the document? Authority means knowing about this author's education, work history, affiliations, additional publications, etc.
2. Who published the Internet resource? Was the web page published by a business, university, government organization, or professional association?

3. Can you find the date the Internet resource was last updated or published? Currency means knowing the date when the document was produced or last updated, and this enables you to identify the historical context for the document.
4. Does the Internet resource cite the work of others? Are sources clearly listed so they can be verified? Is there editorial input? Is spelling and grammar correct?
5. Does the content of the resource seem balanced and scholarly, or is it biased? Are biases and affiliations clearly stated? The aspiration to be objective, however difficult it might be to achieve, is a traditional value of academic research.
6. What is the intended audience for the Internet resource? Is it appropriate for university-level research? Or is it geared toward secondary education or a more general audience?
7. What is the domain of the Internet resource? If it ends in .org, .gov, or .edu, it is more likely to be a scholarly source. If it ends in .com or .net, it is less likely to be a scholarly source.

Blogs can also be a valuable source for information on trending issues, current events, recent research, debates, and more. Scholars, associations, executives, innovative researchers, everyday practitioners, and students are just some of the people who write blogs. Knowing about and reading blogs that are written by experts in the field, or relevant associations, may be an important step in identifying current studies and trends in a subject area. The website ResearchBlogging.org aggregates blog posts regarding recent peer-reviewed research and publications. Most online popular and news magazines have blog sections. *Psychology Today* offers a large index of its blogs with a guide to its blogging experts' credentials. Harvard Business Review Blog Network features entries written by top executives and business leaders.

The ease of access of web-based articles makes these sources of materials highly attractive. Remember, if you cannot determine the author of information or the date it was produced, however, it has no place in academic research. Although many websites for government agencies, professional organizations, and educational institutions provide useful information, you should always evaluate information obtained from a website for currency, legitimacy, accuracy, and potential bias.

Step 2: Review and Critically Analyze the Literature

Once you have undertaken a comprehensive literature search, you will need to critically assess each piece of material to analyze its content. In other words, you read with the goal of producing a product—an analytical evaluation. Toward this end, you need to put yourself in the role of researcher and prepare a systematic and comprehensive method of critical analysis. Narrowing potential research topics as well as continuing to identify related sources is needed to further understand and clarify what will be eventually studied. Remember, simply reading and describing/summarizing a source is not enough to be considered a scholarly consumer of the literature. Sections and related paragraphs should consist of discussions focused on identified concepts/themes from the research findings to provide a comprehensive review of the related literature. In addition to a critical analysis of a particular source, multiple sources also need to be compared and contrasted, and this information needs to be related with the specific topic, issue, or problem currently under investigation. The ability to provide an accurate evaluative critique of another scholar's research is the analysis component of creating a quality literature review.

Analysis is the job of systematically breaking down something into its constituent parts to describe how they relate to one another. Analysis should be viewed not as a random dissection but as a methodological examination. Although there is a degree of exploration involved in analysis, you should aim to be systematic, rigorous, and consistent. In this way, the identification of the individual and similar elements in a range of materials can be compared and contrasted. Analysis lays the foundation for critique. Critique identifies the strengths and key contributions of the literature as well as any deficiencies, omissions, inaccuracies, or inconsistencies. By highlighting the strengths and identifying the deficiencies in the existing literature, critical analysis is a necessary step toward adding to the knowledge base. When writing the literature review, you will need most of this information in order to put together a synthesized, analyzed, and evaluated product. You are practicing dissecting literature for the important specific pieces of information needed. You are condensing the amount of information that you will need to refresh your memory later. And you are developing a way to document, compare, and contrast what has been researched, what has been found, what has worked, what has not, and what has been recommended. All of these are the essential skills you will need to have in your toolbox for the dissertation journey. Right now you cannot know just how extremely important these skills are as you are collecting your sources.

Analysis consists of two main stages:

Skim and Read

1. Skim the book or article first, noting its topic, structure, general reasoning, data, and bibliographical references.
2. Go back and skim the preface and introduction, trying to identify the main ideas contained in the work.
3. Identify key parts of the article, or if a book, identify key chapters. Read these parts or chapters, as well as the final chapter or conclusion.

Highlight and Extract Key Elements

What you are trying to do is understand the historical context and state of the art relevant to your topic. You are looking at what has been covered in the literature, but you are also looking for gaps and anomalies. Although there will be considerable variation among the different pieces of literature, it is imperative to develop a format and use it consistently. A consistent format will pay off when you begin to synthesize your material and actually write the review. Begin by asking specific questions of the literature. These questions will help you think through your topic and provide you with some idea of how to structure your synthesis discussion.

- What are the origins and definitions of the topic?
- What are the key theories, concepts, and ideas?
- What are the major debates, arguments, and issues surrounding the topic?
- What are the key questions and problems that have been addressed to date?
- Are there any important issues that have been insufficiently addressed or not addressed at all?

In analyzing research studies, you need to identify and extract some of the more technical elements common to all research studies, such as problem, purpose, research questions, sample,

methodology, key findings, conclusions, and recommendations. The purpose of reading analytically is to identify and extract these pertinent components in the literature. However, as you read and analyze, you should be on the lookout for the broader themes, issues, and commonalities among the various authors. Also be aware of “outliers” (i.e., points of divergence and difference). Regarding research articles reviewed, make notes of major trends, patterns, or inconsistencies in the results reported. Also try to identify relationships between studies. These findings will all be important to mention in the final synthesis, which aims to integrate all the literature reviewed. A concept map can be developed to begin processing information learned from related sources, helping to organize collected information into themes or categories and then organize this into an outline in preparation to develop a more comprehensive literature review. Concept maps are therefore useful for the identification of potential areas of inquiry for the dissertation. Once writing begins, additional searches and concept mapping will likely be needed to expand upon the earlier identified themes or categories. This expansion of reviewing additional sources during the writing process allows for a more comprehensive search and understanding of the related existing research.

As you continue to read and analyze the literature, also begin to think about what other information you might need so you can refine your search accordingly.

Following are some organizing strategies to assist you in analyzing your material:

1. Read your “very important” documents first. Highlight, make notations in the margins, or write memos on sticky notes of inconsistencies, similarities, questions, concerns, and possible omissions as you go along.
2. Develop a computerized filing system of Word documents for your literature review. For every piece of material that you read, write a brief summary that covers the essential points: major issues, arguments, and theoretical models. Include conclusions that you can draw, and note any inferences that you can make regarding your own study.
3. As you read, be sure to jot down any pertinent comments or quotations that you think might be useful in the presentation of your review. In so doing, be careful to copy quotations accurately. Make sure to use quotation marks when extracting material directly so as to avoid inadvertently plagiarizing others’ ideas and/or words. Direct quotations also require page numbers, and it will save you considerable time and energy later in the process if you have noted these page numbers accurately.

Using Annotated Bibliographies

Using annotated bibliographies is one key means to begin organizing literature for later synthesis and inclusion. Whereas a bibliography is a list of sources (books, journals, websites, periodicals, etc.) that one has used for researching a topic, an annotated bibliography is essentially a summary, evaluation, and reflection of each of your sources:

- **Summarize:** Ask yourself: What are the main arguments? What is the point of this book or article? What topics are covered? If this is a research article, what is the thesis and scope of the study, the findings (including any unexpected findings), and the conclusion? Essentially, if somebody asked you what this book or article was about, what would you say?

- **Assess:** After summarizing a source, it is helpful to evaluate it. Ask yourself: Is it a useful source? How does it compare with other sources in my bibliography? Is the information credible and/or reliable? Is this source biased or objective? What is the goal or objective of this source? Do I think the author of this source has achieved this goal or objective? Why or why not? If this is a research article, what is your determination with regard to how this study fits with other related studies, and why does the researcher think the findings are important or significant?
- **Reflect:** Once you have summarized and assessed a source, you need to ask how, if at all, it fits with your research. Ask yourself: Was this source helpful to me? How, and in what ways does it help me shape my argument? How, if at all, can I use this source in my research? Has this source changed the way I think about my topic or research problem? If so, how and in what ways?

When you write annotations for each source that you read, you are not just *collecting* information; you are being forced to read each source more carefully and much more critically. At the professional level, annotated bibliographies allow you to see what has been done in the literature and *where and how your own research and scholarship can fit*. Writing an annotated bibliography also helps you gain a good perspective on relevant bodies of literature and what is being said about your topic. You will begin to develop a good understanding of the issues in your field (current and/or historic) and what others are debating or discussing. Remember, you want your annotations to be useful and meaningful to you, so adding a note that places the material in the context of something else that you've read or in relation to your own research projects will serve to make the annotation more valuable and persuasive. An annotation should present a brief synopsis of each scholarly article, including key elements, recommendations for further research, and critique (strengths and weaknesses). Mostly, this exercise helps you develop your own point of view, a critical element of a good literature review. The templates provided in the following section, (Table 7.2 and Table 7.3), can assist you in organizing your annotations.

Digesting Scholarly Sources

Digesting scholarly sources can be very challenging, and the more you read, the harder it becomes to remember key information. It is therefore essential to be extremely detail oriented so that you do not miss anything. Various tools, in addition to annotated bibliographies, may be useful at this point in the process. Regarding primary research-based sources, consider preparing a summary sheet that compares important characteristics across all the studies that you have reviewed. A template for the analysis and critique of research-based literature is provided as Table 7.2. A template for the analysis and critique of theoretical literature is provided as Table 7.3. These are both useful analytical tools for methodological analysis of the articles prior to beginning the review by conveying the results of your analysis, noting similarities and differences among research studies and/or theories. These tools act as a quick reference and serve as a record of your literature search. In addition, as you fill out each section for each resource, you begin to visualize and internalize the patterns of systematic research efforts. You may see certain links between concepts, gaps in terms of methodology, or recommendations for future research efforts that might suggest a feasible and worthy topic area for your study. Use the sections in each table to help you review, critique, and summarize *each* piece of literature. Remember, you do not need to complete every section, as some might not always apply. The sections are listed as a means

TABLE 7.2 Template for Analysis and Critique of Research-Based Literature

Study Title: _____

Author/Researcher: _____

Publication Date: _____

Full Citation: _____

Methodological Approach/ Research Design/Sampling Methods/Methods of Analysis	
Bodies of Literature Reviewed	
Theoretical/Conceptual Framework	
Research Sample/Participants	
Research Site	
Research Problem	
Research Purpose	
Research Question	
Subquestions	
Data Collection Instruments	
Key Findings	
Limitations of the Study	
Conclusions	
Controversies/Disagreements With Other Researchers	
Recommendations/ Implications for Practice, Policy, Theory, Future Research	

Overall Impressions/Notes to Self: Value/Relevance for Current Dissertation/Call
for Further Research:

Source: A version of this chart first appeared in Bloomberg, L. D. (2007b). *Understanding Qualitative Inquiry: Content and Process* (Part I). Unpublished manuscript.

TABLE 7.3 **Template for Analysis and Critique of Theoretical Literature**

Study Title: _____

Author/Researcher: _____

Publication Date: _____

Full Citation: _____

Overview of Theory or Concept	
Key Premise(s) or Claim(s)	
Reasoning Evidence is provided that clearly supports the claim(s). Opposing claims are recognized and addressed.	
Relevance Extent to which the information directly supports your topic and is useful to your study. What are the implications for your current research?	
Overall Impressions/ Evaluation Does the author suggest the findings can be applied in theory and/or practice? How useful does this work seem to you with regard to theoretical and/or practical applications?	
Synthesis Synthesize the pieces of your critique to emphasize your own main points about the author's work; its relevance and/or application to other theories you have reviewed and to your own study.	

Source: A version of this chart first appeared in Bloomberg, L. D. (2007b). *Understanding Qualitative Inquiry: Content and Process* (Part I). Unpublished manuscript.

to help you generate ideas as you work on reviewing and critically analyzing the literature. Tables such as these can appear in the appendix of your dissertation. Alternatively, they can be included in the body of the literature review chapter to augment and clarify the narrative discussion.

When you first start writing your analyses and evaluations of the literature, these may be fairly long (both winded and lengthwise). This is somewhat useful because it means that when you need to use them, you will be reminded of the article or book, and you will be able to pick and choose what you need. As you become focused more on what it is that you will be writing about, your analyses and evaluations will most likely become shorter. With practice, you can more concisely capture all of the required elements of an analysis. Remember, just as you would not build a home without a sturdy and solid foundation, if you want to make steady progress, scholarly work cannot proceed without the necessary foundation of the comprehensive analysis of the literature that supports or contradicts the concepts, theories, and statements that you need to make.

When you have finished reviewing and critically analyzing all the scholarly sources you have collected, be sure to revisit your entire (and rapidly growing) bibliography to make certain that it is complete and up to date. You now have a complete record of what the literature states about key variables, ideas, and concepts related to your study. Reading through your summaries will serve to highlight important themes, issues, commonalities, and differences—in effect, these are the answers to your critical questions. The resulting insights will give you a sense of the forest as well as the trees. This sense will prepare you to integrate the material you are reading and proceed with writing a coherent and logical synthesis of the literature.

As mentioned previously, one component of becoming an independent scholar is learning how to provide an evaluative critique of the work of other scholars. A critique of scholarly work requires your ability to use high-level critical thinking skills. In addition, you must be able to write constructively and communicate your ideas well, with clear and focused writing. To do so, first you need to demonstrate your ability to clearly and precisely summarize and critically evaluate specific information. Second, you need to demonstrate your ability to clearly present that evaluative information in writing that meets academic and professional expectations. These skills will be invaluable as you go on to develop your literature review and proceed on your journey to become an independent scholar.

Step 3: Synthesis: Write the Review

After you select the literature and organize your thoughts in terms of critically analyzing the literature into discrete parts, you need to arrange and structure a clear and coherent argument. In other words, the next step is to integrate or combine your resources and determine what conclusions can be drawn from the resources *as a group*. To do this, you need to create and present a synthesis—reorganizing and reassembling all the separate pieces and details so that the discussion constitutes *one integrated whole*. In essence, a literature review requires a synthesis of different subtopics to come to a greater understanding of the state of knowledge on a larger issue. This works very much like a jigsaw puzzle. The individual pieces (arguments) must be put together in order to reveal the whole (state of knowledge). Learning to synthesize and present the identified information by concepts, themes, issues, or topics is necessary, as a literature review is not simply an overview of reviewed literature, a study-by-study presentation, or a book report.

What Is Synthesis?

Whereas analysis involves systematically breaking down the relevant literature into its constituent parts, synthesis is the act of making connections between those parts identified in the

analysis. Synthesis is about recasting the information into a new and different arrangement—one that is coherent, logical, and explicit. This process might mean bringing new insights to an existing body of knowledge. The intent is to make others think more deeply about and possibly reevaluate what may hitherto have been taken for granted. Synthesis thus builds a knowledge base and extends new lines of thinking.

Synthesis is not a data dump; it is a creative activity. In discussing the literature review, Hart (2018) refers to the “research imagination.” An imaginative approach to searching and reviewing the literature includes having a broad view of the topic; being open to new ideas, methods, and arguments; “playing” with different ideas to see whether you can make new linkages; and following ideas to see where they might lead. We see the literature review as somewhat of a sculpture—a work of art that, in its molding, requires dedication, creativity, and flexibility.

Synthesis Versus Summary

A common challenge that students face when writing Chapter 2 is the ability to synthesize information in a scholarly manner. A literature review is not a summary. Rather than merely presenting a summary of each source or study one after the next (like an annotated bibliography or a list of research), a literature review should be organized according to each subtopic (issue or theme) that is included in the discussion, all related to the larger topic. Presenting the literature in this way allows several authors to “speak” at once, thereby *creating a dialogue* about a topic between multiple researchers and their findings.

It is imperative to understand that a literature review is a *critical analysis*, a comprehensive understanding, and a synthesis of the existing research concerning a particular topic. Eventually, the importance of as well as a gap or gaps in the existing knowledge base need to be clearly indicated from the synthesis of the related research findings to support the need to research the proposed topic. Summarizing and synthesizing information are both strategies that are used in reading, review, and research. Both are important skills or techniques in making sense of what one is reading. However, it is important to remember that they are different activities. Each has a different purpose, process, and outcome. Table 7.4 highlights the key differences between summarizing and synthesizing information.

TABLE 7.4 Comparison: Synthesis and Summary

Synthesis	Summary
An advanced reading technique or skill that requires critical analysis, creativity, and insight.	A basic or intermediary reading technique.
Combines and contrasts information and ideas from different sources.	Information is collated, reiterated, and restated.
Information from different sources is integrated to highlight important points of connection and relatedness, to address similarities and differences, and to draw conclusions.	Information is pulled together and listed to highlight important or key points.

Synthesis	Summary
Combines parts and elements from a variety of sources into one unified or integrated entity.	Addresses distinct sets of information. Each piece of information or source remains distinct and separate.
Focuses on deeper ideas and details.	Presents a cursory overview.
The final product reflects the author's knowledge about the sources but also creates new insights or perspectives that add value to the intellectual discussion.	The final product indicates and describes what the sources stated.
Synthesis extends the literal meaning of a text to the inferential level. The final product achieves new ways of thinking and understanding about a body of literature.	A summary captures the literal meaning of texts. The final product demonstrates an understanding of the overall body of literature that was summarized.

How to Synthesize

The good news is that you are already experienced in synthesizing information. You infer relationships among sources probably on a daily basis, such as between a story you heard from a news source and discussions about the same topic with others. Similarly, to synthesize the literature you have collected, you will look to find relationships between your scholarly sources. The first step is digesting the material and understanding the content of the sources. The second step is to review and critically analyze the sources. The third step is to synthesize—that is, going beyond your critique to determine the relationships or patterns among sources, identifying and then comparing and contrasting common concepts or themes. For example, you might find in your readings that certain themes emerged, such as Theme A, B, and C. You might group information from your sources by theme and then compare and contrast. Another scenario could be that your critical analysis revealed that there was one seminal study done that all other researchers expanded upon. Are there overall themes or patterns in the literature? Based on whatever patterns or themes you find, try to infer beyond what the sources have indicated. Determine what this information is suggesting and whether it provides support and a direction for the research topic. What do you believe the patterns or themes suggest? Do they suggest future areas of inquiry? May they suggest a direction for your own research efforts?

A key skill for the development of a well-synthesized literature review is learning how to provide an evaluative critique of the work from other scholars. A critique of scholarly work requires the ability to use high-level critical thinking skills; to write objectively and constructively; and to provide ideas in clear, logically organized, and focused writing.

- Determine and identify similarities or commonalities among the articles by group in terms of concepts, patterns, and relationships. For example, did the authors use similar conceptual or theoretical frameworks, sample participants, methodologies, or instruments and procedures to collect data? How and in what ways were the findings similar? Are any studies an extension of another? Remember, you should be noting not only that articles *are* similar but *how* they are similar. In so doing, rather than summarizing, you are highlighting comparisons among articles, providing relevant information and at the same time synthesizing the various works.

- Determine the differences or contradictions among the articles by group. Again, you should be noting not only that articles *are* different but also *how* they are different. For example, did the authors use different theoretical or conceptual frameworks, sample participants, methodologies, or instruments and procedures to collect data? In what ways are the findings different or contradictory?
- Determine general observations and conclusions about each topic given the relationships inferred from the group of articles within each topic. Determine the existence of any reoccurring concepts, relationships, patterns, or themes and if any of these are in need of further inquiry.

A key element that makes for good synthesis is *integration*, which is about making connections between and among ideas and concepts. It is about applying what you are researching within a larger framework, thereby providing a new way of looking at a phenomenon. Your literature review is a demonstration of how your research problem is situated within the larger conversation and/or part of a broader theoretical scheme. To achieve a well-integrated literature review, you must be sure to emphasize relatedness and organize the material in a well-reasoned and meaningful way. The body of the literature review should provide an objective discussion presenting a synthesis of the previous relevant research. Paragraphs should clearly indicate related concepts or themes synthesized from the research review, any identified contradictory concepts, and underlying related conceptual/theoretical framework(s) supported by American Psychological Association-formatted, in-text, peer-reviewed reference citations published within the past 5 years. Because your review should not read like a book report (one author or study after another), you should strive to craft sentences and paragraphs that reflect multiple sources in one reference. As a general rule, the majority of your reference citations should be in parenthetical form to emphasize an explanation of content rather than what each reference stated, or what each author did or said. For example, you would add the author and date of publication at the end of the sentence—that is, “(Bloomberg, 2011).” In contrast, the use of nonparenthetical reference citations, or “Bloomberg (2011) stated,” places the focus on the author, not on concepts.

Because a literature review is *not simply a summary* of different sources, it can be especially difficult to organize the information in a way that makes the writing process simpler. One way that seems helpful in organizing literature reviews is the synthesis matrix. The synthesis matrix is a chart that allows a researcher to sort and categorize the different arguments presented on an issue or topic. Please refer to the two versions of synthesis matrices that follow and decide which might work best for you. One way is to organize your literature by way of each study’s key components (Table 7.5). Another way is to organize the reviewed literature by topics or main ideas (Table 7.6.) These tables are designed to assist you with synthesizing the literature in different ways (your choice!) and are intended as working tools to be used in developing your literature review.

With Matrix A, you will begin grouping studies according to your research components. Across the top of the chart are the spaces to record relevant information pertaining to each study. Each of your sources is then broken down into various categories. When the matrix has been populated, and as you study your matrix closely, you will more clearly notice similarities and differences across all the sources that you have listed. Based on what you see emerging in the matrix, you will be able to start writing your review. As you find new information that relates to your already identified topic, record it appropriately, adding to the matrix.

TABLE 7.5 Synthesis Matrix A (Research Components)

Study/Research Components: _____

Author(s) (Year) Title	Purpose of Study	Sample	Methods	Findings	Themes	Similarities	Uniquenesses
Title A							
Title B							
Title C							

TABLE 7.6 Synthesis Matrix B (Topics or Main Ideas)

Topic or Main Idea: _____

	Source #1	Source #2	Source #3	Source #4
Main Idea A				
Main Idea B				
Main Idea C				
Main Idea D				

With Matrix B, you will begin grouping studies according to topics or main ideas. A new matrix can then be created for any new sources that you acquire and for new topics or main ideas you have identified. Across the top of the chart are the spaces to record sources (literature titles), and along the side of the chart are the spaces to record the main points of argument regarding the topic at hand. As you examine your first source, you will work vertically in the column belonging to that source, recording as much information as possible about each significant idea presented in the work. Follow a similar pattern for all of your subsequent sources. As you find new information that relates to your already identified main points, record this in the pertinent row. In your new sources, you will also probably find new main ideas that you need to add to your list at the left. As you write your review, you will work horizontally in the row belonging to each point discussed. As you combine the information presented in each row, you will begin to see each section of your paper taking shape. Remember, some of the sources may not cover all of the main ideas listed on the left, but that can be useful also. The gaps on your chart could provide clues about the gaps in the current state of knowledge on your topic.

It is important to continue to point out that although the writing process as described might seem somewhat linear, in actuality, the writing process is more cyclical, iterative, and recursive.

As you are writing, you might find you need additional resources. This means going back to searching the literature, analyzing the information, and integrating this with existing work. Similarly, you should work to stay current with research in your field, which may also lead you to incorporate additional sources. This will certainly take time and energy as you go back and forth. It cannot be stressed enough that synthesis is an essential component of a quality literature review. This will be an ongoing process where drafts are refined, revised, and reworked until a final best version is crafted.

Presenting the Review

A literature review must be based on a well-thought-out design or plan that integrates the material discussed. The results of your analysis can provide you with ideas for the structure of your review. To present a coherent and logical review, it is important to create a detailed outline prior to writing. You cannot begin without this. An outline will save you time and effort in the long run and will increase your probability of having an organized review. Don't be surprised, however, if the outline changes as you write. In fact, this is quite often the case, as you will need to arrange and then rearrange to maintain a logical flow of thought.

To create the outline, you need to determine how various theorists define the topic and the themes and/or patterns that have emerged. Themes and patterns translate into headings and subheadings. Differentiating each major heading into logical subheadings gives structure to the review as a whole, helping to advance the argument and clarifying the relationships among sections. Headings and subheadings also enable the reader to see at a glance what is covered in the review. With a completed outline, you can begin to sort your references under their appropriate headings and so begin to present your discussion. Following are some important guidelines for writing.

Be Selective

A comprehensive literature review need not include every piece of material that you have located and/or read. Include only material that is directly relevant to your research problem and the purpose of your study. Although all the material that you reviewed was necessary to help you to situate your own study, not every citation with respect to an issue need be included. The use of too many or nonselective references is an indication of poor scholarship and an inability to separate the central from the peripheral.

Provide Integration and Critique

It is your task as a writer to integrate, rather than just report on, the material you have read. Comment on the major issues that you have discovered. Never present a chain of isolated summaries of previous studies. We have stressed throughout this book that you will need to demonstrate an analytical and critically evaluative stance. Once you have pulled together all of the salient perspectives of other authors vis-à-vis your topics, you need to stand back and provide critique. However, providing a critique in an academic work does not mean you make a personal attack on the work of others. When it comes to writing a critical evaluation, you must treat that work with due respect.

Ensure Legitimacy

In using the literature on a topic, you are using the ideas, concepts, and theories of others. Therefore, it is your responsibility to cite sources correctly and comply with academic and legal

conventions. This means being scrupulous in your record keeping and ensuring that all details of referenced works are accurately and fully cited. This includes work obtained via electronic media such as the Internet, although copyright protection for data on the Internet is currently in a state of flux.

Limit Use of Quotations

As stated in the writing section of Section I, try to limit the use of direct quotations and quote only materials that are stated skillfully and are a clear reflection of a particular point of view. The practice of liberally sprinkling the literature review with quoted material—particularly lengthy quotations—is self-defeating; unessential quotations are a distraction from the line of thought being presented. Mostly, you should paraphrase rather than quote directly. However remember that any ideas whatsoever that you borrow from others require proper citation or acknowledgment.

Follow Academic Style

There are various conventions in academic writing, including such things as the use of certain words and phrases. Some words that might be common in everyday language and conversation are inappropriate for use in a dissertation. For example, “it is obvious,” “it is a fact,” “everyone will agree,” and “normally” are assumptions and presuppositions and as such are often imprecise. In addition, be sure to guard against using discriminatory language. Bear in mind at all times you are writing not an editorial column but a piece of scholarly research to be read by the academic community. You can benefit from seeking feedback from others. It often takes a critical, objective eye to point out gaps, flaws, and inconsistencies in one’s writing.

Revise, Revise, and Revise

A first draft should be just that—a preliminary, tentative outline of what you want to say based on a planned structure. Every writer goes through a series of drafts, gradually working toward something with which he or she can be satisfied. Often what is helpful is to distance yourself from your review and then go back and revisit. Time away for thinking and reflection tends to create “aha moments” and fresh insights. The final draft should be as accurate as possible in terms of both content and structure.

Step 4: Develop the Theoretical or Conceptual Framework

As your literature review is being developed, the synthesis of the research findings should be organized around a viable theoretical or conceptual framework. The review and critique of existing literature should build a logical framework for the research, justify the study by identifying gaps in the literature, and demonstrate how the study will contribute to knowledge development. Development of this framework, which follows the literature review, posits new relationships and perspectives vis-à-vis the literature reviewed, thereby providing the theoretical or conceptual link between the research problem, the literature, and the methodology selected for your research. In this way, this framework is the scaffolding of the study, drawing on theory, research, and experience, and as such, becoming the heuristic device or model that guides your study. Most important, it becomes a *working tool* consisting of categories that emanate from the literature. These categories then become the repository for reporting the findings and guiding data analysis and interpretation. You may be thinking that this still sounds very abstract, and with good reason.

Experience has shown that the theoretical or conceptual framework is one area that many doctoral candidates struggle with as they begin to prepare for their dissertation research. Melding a theoretical or conceptual framework explicitly within the dissertation displays scholarly maturity—that is, increased capacity to think about the conceptual background and context of the research. Students are expected to raise their level of thinking from micro (content) to meta (process) levels of conceptualization. Engaging with the framework is an essential prerequisite for doctoral students, as this is the means through which to articulate the wider theoretical or conceptual significance of their research, their chosen research design, their study's findings, and how their study makes a contribution to knowledge. As research practitioners, we recognize the significance of seeking intellectual rigor and the role of theoretical or conceptual frameworks in achieving this. We have also observed how students encounter difficulties in conceptualizing the framework vis-à-vis their own research. The reason for this knowledge gap is that the term is a somewhat abstract notion, conjuring up a “model” or “diagram” of some sort. Moreover, there do not appear to be uniform and consistent definitions, and discussions in the literature are often not clear, precise, or fully explained. Moreover, oftentimes experienced researchers and advisors themselves encounter challenges in guiding candidates as to what constitutes a rigorous and meaningful theoretical or conceptual framework (Anfara & Mertz, 2015; Ravitch & Riggan, 2017).

These respective difficulties result in large part from research methodology texts lacking a common language regarding the nature of theoretical and conceptual frameworks. As we reviewed the qualitative research literature, it became increasingly clear that those writers who do attempt to explain the notion of theoretical or conceptual frameworks do not do so conclusively and therefore oftentimes offer only vague or insufficient guidance to students in terms of understanding the actual role and place of the framework in the dissertation. Moreover, these two terms are usually used interchangeably in the literature, and some argue that they are in fact two different constructs, both by definition and as actualized during the research process (Imenda, 2014). As such, the structure and function of a conceptual framework continues to mystify and frustrate. Questions that students regularly ask include the following:

- What is a theoretical or conceptual framework, and from where is it derived?
- Why should I include this framework in my dissertation? That is, what purpose does it serve in the research process? And what are its role, function, and application in the dissertation?
- How can the theoretical or conceptual framework strengthen my study? In other words, what is its value?
- What might be the limitations of a theoretical or conceptual framework in my study?
- How do I create and develop my study's framework, and where would I place it in the dissertation?

Each of these key questions is addressed next.

The Theoretical or Conceptual Framework: An Overview

At the outset, we want to point out that while the terms *theoretical framework* and *conceptual framework* are usually used interchangeably, they are two different constructs, both by definition and as actualized during the research process. This view, proposed by Imenda (2014), claims that whereas a deductive approach to literature review typically makes use of theories and theoretical

frameworks, an inductive approach tends to lead to the development of a conceptual framework, which may take the form of a (conceptual) model. According to Imenda (2014), a theoretical framework refers to the theory that researchers may choose to guide them in their research. Thus, a theoretical framework is the application of a theory to offer an explanation of an event or shed some light on a particular phenomenon or research problem. In some cases, a research problem can be meaningfully researched not in reference to a theory but rather in terms of concepts inherent within theory. In such cases, the researcher may have to synthesize existing views in the literature concerning a given situation, both theoretical and from empirical findings. The synthesis that is developed may be called a conceptual framework or model, which essentially represents an integrated way of looking at the problem. Such a model could then be used in place of a theoretical framework. A conceptual framework is therefore the result of bringing together a number of related concepts to provide a broader understanding of a phenomenon of interest or of a research problem. The process of arriving at a conceptual framework is an inductive process whereby small individual pieces (concepts) fit together to illustrate possible relationships. Viewed this way, a conceptual framework is derived from concepts, and a theoretical framework is derived from a theory.

A research study is a complex system consisting of multiple interconnected parts. The theoretical or conceptual framework will constitute the glue that ties these parts together and establishes a sense of interdependence. Grant and Osanloo (2014) define a theoretical framework as

the foundation from which all knowledge is constructed (metaphorically and literally) for a research study. It serves as the structure and support for the rationale for the study, the problem statement, the purpose, the significance, and the research questions. The theoretical framework provides a grounding base, or an anchor, for the literature review, and most importantly, the methods and analysis. (p. 12)

Ravitch and Carl (2016) view a conceptual framework in the following way:

The conceptual framework is a generative source of thinking, planning, conscious action, and reflection throughout the research process. A conceptual framework makes the case for why a study is significant and relevant, and for how the study design appropriately and rigorously answers the research questions . . . When conceptualized holistically, a conceptual framework serves as the “connective tissue” of a research study in that it helps you to integrate and mobilize your understanding of the various influences on and aspects of a specific research study in ways that create a more intentional systematic process of explicitly connecting the various parts of the study. (pp. 34–35)

These authors go on further to explain,

The guiding sources for constructing a conceptual framework include (a) the researcher, (b) tacit theory or working conceptualizations, (c) the goals of a study, (d) study setting and context, (e) broader macro-sociopolitical contexts, (f) formal or established theory. (2016, p. 40)

This framework therefore guides the entire research process, enabling researchers to make reasoned defensible choices, match research questions with those choices, align analytic tools

with research questions, and thereby guide data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Many researchers contend that without a theoretical or conceptual framework, there would be no way to make reasoned decisions in the research process (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Maxwell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014; Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). Indeed, the framework that you will develop for your study will no doubt play an extremely central role throughout the entire research process and, most important, in the final analysis. Without theoretical or conceptual development and refinement, and a clear relationship to your research design and implementation, the study could remain weakly conceptualized, undertheorized, and less generative of quality data.

Miles et al. (2014) define a conceptual framework as “the current version of the researcher’s map of the territory being investigated” (p. 20). Implicit in this view is that conceptual frameworks evolve as research evolves. This notion accommodates purpose (boundaries) with flexibility (evolution) and coherence of the research (plan/analysis/conclusion), which all stem from the study’s framework. It is important to realize that thinking about your theoretical or conceptual framework and actually building it is an iterative process. As such, an initial framework can—and most likely will—be revised, reflecting emergent findings and new insights (Anfara & Mertz, 2015; Maxwell, 2013; Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). Of interest is that Weaver-Hart (1988) argues that conceptual frameworks contain an inherent dilemma, recognizing that the term itself is a contradiction because concepts are abstract whereas frameworks are concrete. As a consequence, she views the conceptual framework as “a structure for organizing and supporting ideas; a mechanism for systematically arranging abstractions; sometimes revolutionary or original, and usually rigid” (Weaver-Hart, 1988, p. 11).

We contend strongly that the framework, while guiding and grounding the research, evolves and unfolds both generatively and recursively as the research process progresses and, as such, should be construed as including both rigor and fluidity in its iterative development and refinement. Because it is so central a component of your dissertation, and because its scope is far reaching throughout the subsequent chapters of a dissertation, development of the theoretical or conceptual framework requires careful, logical, and thoughtful explication.

Role, Function, and Application of the Theoretical or Conceptual Framework

It should be noted that the terms *conceptual framework* and *theoretical framework* are often used interchangeably, and rarely is a clear differentiation made. A theory is a relationship among related concepts, assumptions, and generalizations. By virtue of its application nature, good theory in the social sciences is of value precisely because it fulfills one primary purpose: to explain the meaning, nature, and challenges of a phenomenon, often experienced but unexplained in the world in which we live, so that we may use that knowledge and understanding to act in more informed and effective ways. Concepts are defined as interrelated ideas. As Cohen, Lawrence, and Morrison (2000) point out, concepts enable us to impose some sort of meaning on the world; through them, reality is given sense, order, and coherence (that is, concepts are the means by which we are able to come to terms with our experience). This idea suggests conceptualization as “meaning making” in research. The implication is that a conceptual framework is more than just a set of theories and issues related to the research topic.

What is key is the *cyclical role* for theoretical or conceptual frameworks in providing coherence for research. A well-conceived conceptual framework *is influenced by and at the same time influences* the research process at all levels and at all stages. Developing a conceptual framework compels researchers to be explicit about what they think they are doing and also helps them to

be selective—to decide which are the important features of the research, which relationships are likely to be of significance, and hence what data they are going to go ahead and collect and analyze (Maxwell, 2013; Ravitch & Riggan, 2017).

It becomes clear, then, that the *relationships* between theoretical variables, constructs, or concepts are an essential component of high-quality research and are expressed explicitly through conceptualizations and frameworks. The conceptual framework itself gives meaning to the relationship between variables by illustrating that theories have the potential to provide insight and understanding regarding research topics; it is the device that makes sense of data. In this way, the conceptual framework becomes the lens through which your research problem is viewed, providing a theoretical overview of intended research as well as some sort of methodological order within that process.

A well-defined theoretical or conceptual framework contributes toward thinking more acutely about your research: It frames and grounds your entire study. It helps define the research problem and purpose, as well as aids in the selection of appropriate bodies of literature for review. It serves as a filter for developing appropriate research questions. And it acts as a guide for data collection and analysis, and interpretation of findings. This way of viewing the framework locates it as fulfilling an integrating function between highlighting theories that offer explanations of the issues under investigation and providing a scaffold within which strategies for the research design can be determined and fieldwork undertaken. This view of the framework thus locates it as providing *coherence* to the research act through providing traceable connections between theoretical perspectives, research strategy and design, fieldwork, and the conceptual significance of the evidence. A framework is simply the structure of the research idea or concept and how it is put together. The conceptual framework is therefore essentially a bridge between paradigms that *explain* the research issue and the *actual practice* of investigating that issue.

Viewed this way, then, the framework fulfills two distinct roles: First, it provides a theoretical or conceptual clarification of what researchers intend to investigate and enables readers to be clear about what the research seeks to achieve and how that will be achieved. Second, the conceptual framework forms the theoretical and methodological bases for development of the study and analysis of the findings. Students often do not realize how critical the conceptual framework is in guiding the analysis of the data that have been collected. We stress that the conceptual framework is a practical working tool for guiding the analysis of the data collected, and it becomes the foundation for what will become the coding legend or coding scheme.

The Value of the Theoretical or Conceptual Framework

Theory or concepts help to situate a study within ongoing conversations in relevant fields, guiding all aspects of the study and adding new dimensions and layers of understanding about the phenomenon of interest, and hence extend the meaningfulness of data. The theoretical or conceptual framework strengthens your study in the following ways:

1. Organizes and focuses the study. Qualitative researchers can feel overwhelmed by the mountain of data that confronts them. First, by serving as a “sieve” or “lens,” the framework assists the researcher in the process of sorting through the data and knowing how the pieces drawn from the various data relate to each other and where they “fit” in the larger picture. Second, framework “frames” every aspect of the study in terms of both the process and the product, illustrating how theory or concepts intersect with other components of the study, including research questions, methods, working assumptions, data analysis, and analysis and interpretation of findings.

2. Provides the “idea context,” making an argument for the rationale and significance of the study for its intended field and discipline.
3. Is an explicit statement of theoretical or conceptual assumptions that permits the reader to evaluate them critically.
4. Situates the research within a scholarly conversation and connects the researcher to the existing body of knowledge. Guided by relevant theory or concepts, the framework provides you with labels and categories that help explain and develop descriptions and analyses.
5. Articulating the theoretical or conceptual assumptions of a research study forces you to address questions of “why” and “how.” It permits you to move from simply describing a phenomenon observed to generalizing about various aspects of that phenomenon.
6. Having a theoretical or conceptual structure helps you to identify the limits to those generalizations. The framework specifies which key variables or factors influence a phenomenon of interest. It alerts you to examine how those key variables or factors might differ and under what circumstances.
7. The framework, once developed and articulated, becomes the means by which new research data can be interpreted and coded for future use, as well as a means to guide and inform future research efforts and improve professional practice.
8. The framework ultimately serves as a mechanism to consider and reflect on the significance and value of your research once it is completed, as well as to consider next steps and actionable recommendations.

Limitations of the Theoretical or Conceptual Framework

While the theoretical or conceptual framework has a role and function in the dissertation process, there are some critiques that are worthy of mention and that should be taken into consideration:

Anfara and Mertz (2015) make an important statement about the role and function of the theoretical framework in qualitative research. In acknowledging that the term does not have a clear and consistent definition, they also point out very clearly that a framework allows the researcher to “see” and understand certain aspects of the phenomenon being studied while hiding other aspects. A theoretical framework can reveal and/or conceal meaning and understanding. It can allow us to see familiar phenomena in novel ways, but it can also blind us to certain aspects of the phenomena or distort the phenomena being studied by filtering out critical pieces of data. As such, it is important to bear in mind that while your framework provides a meaningful way of seeing, thinking, and understanding, no theoretical or conceptual framework provides one perfect or complete explanation of what is being studied, an important consideration in your research process in terms of the effects of your framework on your research (including data collection as well as data analysis). Indeed, as exemplified in Anfara and Mertz (2015), using different frameworks on the same data can broaden and deepen the understanding derived. Moreover, “a framework can potentially disrupt the dominant narrative in the field, and even what counts as knowledge about a phenomenon” (Anfara & Mertz, 2015, p. 229). These authors also point out two other potential additional limitations of conceptual or theoretical frameworks: First, while the framework certainly has the ability to organize and focus a study, the framework could be too reductionist, stripping the phenomenon of its complexity and interest. Second, the framework could be too deterministic, forcing the researcher to “fit” the data into predetermined categories.

In the following section, we describe how a theoretical or conceptual framework is developed, how it is used as a coding legend or coding scheme to sort and analyze the data, and how it can subsequently be logically simplified and presented graphically as a model that represents the overall design of a given research project.

Creating Your Theoretical or Conceptual Framework

Conceptualization and development of a theoretical or conceptual framework for your study is an evolving, iterative, generative, and reflexive process that integrates all aspects of the study in an explicit and transparent way. Remember, this framework is not something that is found readily available in the literature. You will have to review pertinent research literature for theories, concepts, and analytic models that are relevant to the research problem you are investigating. The selection of theories or concepts should depend on appropriateness, ease of application, and explanatory power. There are some useful strategies for developing a theoretical or conceptual framework for your study:

1. Reflect on your study's title and research problem. The research problem anchors your entire study and forms the basis from which you construct your theoretical or conceptual framework.
2. Think of a philosophy, theory, and/or any relevant concepts on which the topical issue of your dissertation is based. Brainstorm all possibilities.
3. Review any key social science theories that might be related to your study and choose one or more that can explain or shed light on your research problem and purpose.
4. Discuss with your advisor the assumptions or propositions of these theories, with a focus on their potential relevance or connection to your research.

Although presented in a stepwise fashion, please remember that this process is not linear but rather cyclical and iterative. Building your framework is in effect a dynamic sense-making *process*, helping to refine the research as it progresses—as much guiding the study as it is derived from the study. Indeed, the framework generates the focus of the research as much as it is informed and shaped by it (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). The process of development requires deep thinking and critical analysis on your part. It also requires creativity and innovation, since your framework will become the basis for understanding, analyzing, and designing ways to investigate relationships within the social system you are studying. Remember, too, that it is quite usual to develop and discard several potential theoretical or conceptual frameworks until one is finally chosen. Again, this is part of the iterative qualitative research process. A review of the literature for studies similar to yours will reveal what types of theoretical or conceptual frameworks other researchers have utilized. We encourage you to read through the literature review chapters or sections of dissertations and journal articles related to your study because in this way, you will begin to see how this topic was approached by other scholars.

Presenting Your Theoretical or Conceptual Framework

The review and critique of existing literature culminates in a conceptual framework. The conceptual framework is described in detailed narrative form and can also be summarized and displayed as a schematic diagram—that is, a visual device that represents the overall design of a research project including key concepts and their relationships. Thinking and reflective inquiry require that you create structures that will enable you to examine your own assumptions and ask deep questions of your research. In this regard, diagrams of various kinds become useful and relevant.

Diagrams may include mind maps, flowcharts, tree diagrams, and so on. A concept map (Cañas & Novak, 2005; Kane & Trochim, 2006; Maxwell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994;

Miles et al., 2014; Novak, 1998; Wheeldon & Ahlberg, 2012) is one type of diagram that lays out key ideas related to your area of research and indicates relationships between these areas. Concept mapping entails plotting the conceptual “space” of your research and is a useful medium for thinking about information and visualizing relationships in different ways, developing and testing ideas, and containing the study by indicating and highlighting connections, gaps, and/or contradictions. Concept maps can also assist in data analysis in a number of ways, assisting researchers in the development of deeper insights by recognizing explicit and implicit meanings and assumptions (Wheeldon & Ahlberg, 2012).

Used as a learning and teaching technique, concept mapping visually illustrates the relationships among a set of concepts and ideas. Often represented in circles or boxes, concepts are linked by words and phrases that explain the connections between the ideas, helping students organize and structure their thoughts to further understand information and discover new relationships. Most concept maps represent a hierarchical structure, with the overall broad concept first, with connected subtopics and more specific concepts following. Concepts are usually presented as boxes or circles, and are connected to each other (or not) with lines, arrows, or symbols, indicating some type of relationship among them. For a thematic analysis, boxes typically represent concepts such as themes identified in the data (i.e., codes) or higher-level conceptual themes the researcher generates. Current qualitative software packages are becoming increasingly sophisticated in terms of concept-mapping functions that depict complex conceptual relationships. Concept maps can be developed collaboratively with colleagues or advisors and as such can engender the high-level conversation and dialogue that is necessary to promote, stimulate, and expand reflective inquiry.

A diagram is more than just a repository of thought, however; it is a working and living document that arises from analysis. As such, the diagram becomes an important analytic tool in your qualitative research process. As Corbin and Strauss (2015) explain, diagrams “begin as rudimentary representations of thought, and grow in complexity, density, clarity, and accuracy as the research progresses” (p. 117). It is important that while you may choose to present your conceptual framework in diagrammatic or pictorial form, you should be prepared to explain, describe, and articulate that diagram in great detail, including all major constructs or concepts as well as relationships among all the key elements.

Remember that there is no single way to go about developing, using, articulating, and presenting a conceptual framework. A useful starting point is to engage in a process of critical inquiry and self-examination, and to continue this critical stance throughout the research process. Identification of your own personal and professional motivation for engaging in your chosen research topic or phenomenon is a useful beginning. Ask yourself why you have engaged in your research, what about it interests you, how your motivation might impact your research approach, what are your underlying assumptions and hunches, and what informs these assumptions and hunches. Next, proceed to ask yourself questions that relate to the broader intellectual conversations in your field, as these constitute the context and background for your research: Ask yourself what are some of the key arguments, what your stance is vis-à-vis these arguments, what are the key critical questions that you have vis-à-vis conversations in the field, how you conceptualize your research in relation to these conversations, and what you hope your study will contribute to the overall intellectual conversation.

In Section II of this chapter, we explain the development of the theoretical or conceptual framework and illustrate its application. An example of a completed conceptual framework is also included as Appendix E. The intent is that with new insights and knowledge regarding the role and function of a conceptual framework, you will be able to craft one that is distinctively yours and unique to your own study. How the theoretical or conceptual framework functions specifically with regard to data analysis is elaborated upon in Chapter 9 (“Analyzing Data and Reporting Findings”).

The reflexive questions that follow can serve as prompts for journaling throughout the dissertation process, and in this case, for Chapter 2 of your dissertation, in which you are developing your literature review and your study's theoretical or conceptual framework.

Remember, the major purpose of reviewing the literature is to determine what has already been examined as it relates to your topic, thereby highlighting the significance of your research problem. This affords you the understanding and insight needed to situate your study within an existing "conversation"; acquire a deep understanding of your topic and research problem; discover what contributions other writers and researchers have made relative to your topic and/or research problem; and become aware of any key issues and debates in the field, thereby beginning to develop a "space" for your own work. A review of the literature guides your study, both during the development phase as well as during analysis. Development of a theoretical or conceptual framework is for the purpose of proposing new relationships and perspectives vis-à-vis the literature reviewed, thereby providing a theoretical or conceptual link between the research problem, the literature, and the methodology selected for your research.

Reflexive Questions for Chapter 2: Literature Review

Literature Review

1. Have I considered the key relevant bodies of literature that might relate to my research topic and research questions, thereby adequately framing the context of my research problem?
2. How and in what ways have my assumptions informed the way I understand and define the research problem, based on which I have selected what research to review?
3. Have I addressed the major theoretical conversations and debates in the field(s) around my research topic (both current and historical)?
4. Am I cognizant of the ways in which different studies and fields of study intersect and diverge, and have I reported these relationships accurately?
5. Have I sufficiently considered and addressed how my research topic or research problem is framed or studied differently within and across fields?
6. Have I adequately addressed and critiqued all relevant literature, including elements that I had not expected or perhaps chosen not to address?

Theoretical or Conceptual Framework

1. In what ways will my theoretical or conceptual framework serve as a relevant and meaningful structure for my study?
2. Why did I select this framework, and what are the possibilities for the chosen framework to substantiate my research problem?
3. Have I considered alternative framework options?
4. If there were other options that I considered, why did I choose not to include these?

Chapter Summary Discussion

Broadly speaking, a literature review is a narrative that integrates, synthesizes, and critiques the research and thinking around a particular topic. It sets the broad context of the study, clearly demarcates what is and is not within the scope of the investigation, and justifies those decisions. A literature review should not only report the claims made in the existing literature but also examine it critically. Such an examination of the literature enables the reader to distinguish what has been and still needs to be learned and accomplished in the area of study. Moreover, in a good review, the researcher not only summarizes the existing literature but also synthesizes it in a way that permits a new perspective. Thus, a good literature review is the basis of both theoretical and methodological sophistication, thereby improving the quality and usefulness of subsequent research. As the foundation of the research project, a comprehensive review of the literature in a dissertation should accomplish several distinct objectives:

- Frame the research problem by setting it within a larger context.
- Focus the purpose of your study more precisely.
- Lead to the refinement of research questions.
- Form the basis for determining the rationale and significance of your study.
- Enable you to convey your understanding of your research approach, as well as the specific data collection methods employed.
- Link your findings to previous studies.
- Place research within a historical context to show familiarity with state-of-the-art developments.
- Enable you to justify, support, and substantiate your study's findings.
- Contribute to analysis and interpretation of your study's findings.
- Enable you to develop a conceptual framework that can be used to guide your research.

It should be apparent to you that the literature review is a sophisticated form of research in its own right that requires a great deal of research skill and insight. You are expected to identify appropriate topics or issues, justify why these are the appropriate choices for addressing the research problem, search for and retrieve the appropriate literature, analyze and critique the literature, create new understandings of the topic through synthesis, and develop a conceptual framework that will provide the underlying structure for your study. Your conceptual or theoretical framework emanates from your literature review and is used to limit the scope of the relevant data by focusing on specific concepts and theories and defining the specific viewpoint (framework) that you as the researcher will take in analyzing and interpreting the data to be gathered. Your conceptual framework will also provide the basis for understanding the essence of your study and building knowledge by confirming or challenging theoretical assumptions.

Thinking about the entire literature review process may initially be overwhelming and intimidating. Instead of viewing it as one big whole, think of it as a series of steps—and steps within those steps. Tackle each topic one by one and set small achievable goals within each topic area. Be sure to subdivide your work into manageable sections, taking on and refining

each section one at a time. The important point, and one that we stress throughout, is that you should proceed in stages. Like the skier traversing the terrain, the best way to be successful is to divide and conquer!

TABLE	
Quality Assessment Chapter Checklist	
Preparing the Literature Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Are you clear about the role and scope of the literature review vis-à-vis your chosen qualitative research tradition? ✓ Are you familiar with all available resources, including library indexing systems and electronic databases? ✓ Have you set up your own systems for identifying, retrieving, organizing, and storing your information? ✓ Have you made sure that all information is securely saved by way of electronic storage and backup systems?
Writing the Literature Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Do you have a clear introduction to this chapter that includes your purpose statement (if required) as well as an explanation of how the chapter will be organized? ✓ Does your review show a clear understanding and critique of each topic? ✓ Do you write with authority and develop a critical perspective in discussing the work of others? ✓ Is the review comprehensive? Does it cover the major issues and thinking around each topic? ✓ Does your review adequately frame the context of your specific research problem? ✓ Does your review highlight the significance of your research problem? ✓ Does the review reflect appropriate bodies of peer-reviewed literature? ✓ Does your review include relevant historical as well as current and most up-to-date coverage? ✓ Have you identified the key readings and authors (including seminal authors) in your area of research? ✓ Does the path of your argument flow logically? ✓ Is the review analytical and critical, and not merely summative and descriptive? Do you include opposing points of view? ✓ Is the review well organized and systematically presented?

(Continued)

TABLE (Continued)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Do you include an introductory paragraph that outlines the way you organize the different bodies of literature? ✓ Are the methods for conducting the literature review sufficiently described? ✓ Does the order of headings and subheadings seem logical? ✓ Do you include logical segues between sections? ✓ Do you make use of transitions to link and integrate paragraphs? ✓ Do you include summary paragraphs at the end of each major section as well as an overall summary at the end of the chapter? ✓ Is the writing throughout clear and readable? Refer to “Guidelines for Academic Writing” in Chapter 4. ✓ Have you checked that you have not used somebody’s words without appropriate quotation marks or stated the ideas of others as if they were your own, thereby constituting plagiarism? ✓ Have you avoided too much paraphrasing and too many direct quotations that detract from the readability of the chapter? ✓ Are all authors who make the same point combined in a citation?
Developing the Theoretical or Conceptual Framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Does your framework draw on theory, research, relevant concepts, and experience? ✓ Does your framework depict the overall “territory” of your research? ✓ Does your framework provide theoretical clarification of what you intend to investigate? ✓ Does your framework illuminate the relationships among theoretical or conceptual variables? ✓ Does your framework enable a reader to understand <i>what</i> your study seeks to achieve and <i>how</i> that will be achieved? ✓ If you have developed a diagrammatic model, is this clearly and accurately presented? In other words, does it make sense and have meaning?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ If you have developed a diagrammatic model, is this accompanied by comprehensive descriptive narrative? ✓ If you have developed theoretical or conceptual categories, are these directly tied to the research questions? ✓ Do you have at least one theoretical or conceptual category per research question? ✓ Have you included descriptors that are based on the literature, pilot studies, and your own hunches? ✓ Do these descriptors make sense? ✓ Are there any other descriptors that you may have forgotten to include? ✓ Does your theoretical or conceptual framework add value to the way you and others understand your research? ✓ Does your chosen framework enhance the theoretical or conceptual quality of your dissertation?
Addressing Alignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Is your research problem aligned with your literature review? ✓ Is your literature review aligned with your theoretical/conceptual framework? ✓ Is your theoretical/conceptual framework aligned with your research questions and research findings?
And . . .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Are all citations included in the reference list? ✓ Have all citations that you have not included been eliminated from the reference list? ✓ Are the majority of your references published in the past 5 years? ✓ Have you checked your recommended style manual for format, punctuation, grammar, and correct use of each and every citation? ✓ Have you edited and reedited your work?

Section II: Application

Having discussed the purpose and function of the literature review and resulting conceptual framework, as well as the various steps involved, we are now ready to introduce what a completed literature review chapter should look like. In this application section, we focus on the specific research problem as outlined in the introductory chapter of the dissertation and explain how to develop and present the associated literature review and conceptual framework.

Please note that because of the nature of the literature review, it would be impractical to present here a full-blown literature review on our topic. Rather, we have identified each of the actual steps that should be followed in completing your literature review and provided illustrative examples in outline or skeleton form. The intent of presenting the application piece in this way is that you could use these steps as a template and present your own literature review in the same order. These steps include the following:

1. Provide a statement of purpose.
2. Identify the topics or bodies of literature.
3. Provide the rationale for topics selected.
4. Describe your literature review process, report all of your literature sources, and identify the keywords used to search the literature.
5. Present the review of each topic.
6. Present your theoretical or conceptual framework.
7. Provide a brief chapter summary of the literature review and its implications for your study.

Steps 1 through 4 constitute all that is necessary to introduce the literature review to the reader. Steps 5 and 6 constitute the “meat” of the review. Step 7 is intended to highlight the main points, thereby providing some closure for the chapter. In the following pages, we put each of these steps into play and provide an illustration of Chapter 2, the literature review of a dissertation. Bear in mind that the application section that follows is a skeleton view of a literature review chapter. Were each section to be more completely and fully developed, as would be required in an actual dissertation, such a chapter would obviously be much more extensive.

Chapter 2 of the Dissertation

Literature Review

Overview

The purpose of this case study was to explore with 20 doctoral candidates their perceptions of why they have not managed to complete their dissertations. Specifically, the researchers sought to understand how the experiences of these individuals may have inhibited their progress in conducting and carrying out research. To carry out this study, it was necessary to complete a critical review of current literature. This review was ongoing throughout the data collection, data analysis, and synthesis phases of the study.

This critical review explores the interconnectedness of the experiences of participants and the resources that they perceived were available to them. In light of this, two major bodies of literature were critically reviewed: (a) higher education and doctoral programs and (b) adult learning theory. A review of the literature on higher education and doctoral programs provides an understanding of the context, history, structure, rules, and regulations under which candidates must work to obtain doctoral degrees. Adult learning theory is reviewed to provide a context for understanding what knowledge, skills, and attitudes were perceived as needed by the participants and how they attempted to learn what they perceived they needed.

In providing a rationale for your choice of topics, in some instances you might want to include an explicit assertion, a contention, or a proposition that relates to the research problem and that is substantiated by supporting literature. The assertion or contention should be broad and be based on the overall judgments you have formed thus far based on an analysis of the literature.

To conduct this selected literature review, the researchers used multiple information sources, including books, dissertations, Internet resources, professional journals, and periodicals. These sources were accessed through ERIC, ProQuest, eduCAT, and CLIO. No specific delimiting time frame was used around which to conduct this search. Because of the nature of the three bodies of literature reviewed, the historical development, for example, of higher education and doctoral programs was considered significant and therefore an arbitrary criterion, such as a time frame, might preclude the inclusion of substantial relevant material.

Throughout the review, the researchers attempted to point out important gaps and omissions in particular segments of the literature as and when they became apparent. In addition, relevant contested areas or issues are identified and discussed. Each section of the literature review closes with a synthesis that focuses on research implications. The interpretive summary that concludes the chapter illustrates how the literature has informed the researchers' understanding of the material and how the material contributes to the ongoing development of the study's conceptual framework.

The prior section included how the literature was selected, how information was accessed, what, if any, time delimitations were employed, what keywords and procedures were used to search the literature, what databases were used, and, if appropriate, what criteria were used for retaining or discarding the literature. You also may choose to explain the main ideas and themes from the literature that you identified and by which you carried out your analysis.

Topics Reviewed

Having introduced the reader to your review, go on to present your topics in the order in which you have introduced them in the prior section. For each topic, establish an outline for yourself. Typically, the outline is made up of three interrelated sections: (a) introduction, (b) discussion, and (c) summary, conclusions, and implications that relate to the discussion.

For each topic, start off by putting the reader in the picture so that she or he understands where you are going with your review of a particular topic or subject and how you intend to tackle it. This becomes your introduction to the topic. Give the reader a rationale for the topic and a brief overview of how you have organized the discussion. You also should preview the main points that you will make in the body of the discussion.

The introduction is followed by a systematic review of the material and is subdivided by headings and subheadings based on your analysis and synthesis of the literature. Think

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carefully about how you would like to organize the discussion. Usually, you would start with general material to provide the reader with a comprehensive perspective. You would then proceed to discuss the material that is closely related to your own particular study. Thus, in planning how you will write, arrange your headings and subheadings accordingly because these will allow the reader to follow your train of thought. When appropriate, and especially with research-based literature, you also might employ the summary tables that you constructed when analyzing the literature because these tables reflect the variables or themes inherent in your discussion. At the end of the discussion of each topic, you should offer a concise and cohesive section summary that highlights and clarifies the salient points discussed.

Summary

To provide some form of clarity and closure for the reader, you also need a final concluding summary at the end of the discussion that identifies all the key points mentioned in the review. This final summary should make reference to the line of argumentation that was specified in the introduction and pull the entire discussion together. The point of all the summaries—both those at the end of each topic and the final chapter—is to tell the reader what your review yielded in terms of informing your study.

Conceptual Framework

The review and critique of the literature, combined with the researchers' own experience and insights, has contributed to developing a conceptual framework for the design and conduct of this study. The conceptual framework developed for this study helps to focus and shape the research process, informing the methodological design and influencing the data collection instruments to be used. The conceptual framework also becomes the repository for the data that were collected, providing the basis for and informing various iterations of a coding scheme. As such, this framework provides an organizing structure both for reporting this study's findings and for the analysis, interpretation, and synthesis of these findings. In this way, the conceptual framework is essentially a "working tool."

Each category of the conceptual framework is directly derived from the study's research questions as outlined in Chapter 1. The first research question seeks to determine the extent to which participants perceived they were prepared to conduct research and write the dissertation following the completion of their course work. Therefore, the logical conceptual category to capture responses to this question is "Preparedness for Dissertation Process." The second research question seeks to identify what candidates perceive they need to learn to carry out the dissertation process. The category titled "KSA" is all-encompassing and thus appropriate. The third research question is intended to uncover how candidates go about acquiring the knowledge, skills, and abilities they perceive they need. Hence, the appropriate categorization is "How They Learn." The fourth and fifth research questions attempt to get at the factors that either help or hinder people's progress in the dissertation process; thus, "Facilitators" and "Barriers" are appropriate categories. To further explain each of the categories, the researchers drew on the literature, pilot test data, and their own educated guesses about potential responses to the research questions, which resulted in the various bulleted descriptors under each of the respective categories. During the course of data collection and analysis, some of the descriptors within each of the major categories were added, some were

deleted, and others were collapsed. The conceptual framework was thus continually revised and refined.

As you may note, the prior narrative introduces your conceptual framework and describes what you mean by a conceptual framework, how you have developed it, and how it will be used in your study—that is, its nature, role, and function vis-à-vis your own particular study. You should be aware that, like so many aspects of the dissertation, the conceptual framework takes time to develop. As with the literature review, you will go through various iterations until you finally arrive at a workable, tight conceptual framework for your study. A completed conceptual framework, based on the example used in this book, is included as Appendix E.

Following are some recommended resources that you might consider perusing regarding enhancing your critical writing skills and developing your literature review and theoretical or conceptual framework.

Annotated Bibliography

Anfara, V. A., & Mertz, N. T. (Eds.). (2015). *Theoretical frameworks in qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Recognizing a lack of understanding of the role of the theoretical framework in qualitative research, the purpose of this edited text is to explain through discussion and example what a theoretical framework is, how it is used in qualitative research, and the impact it has on the research process. The book is essentially a “reflective thinking tool”: It is presented in the format of a multiplistic conversation about how theory is used in actual qualitative studies. The editors offer a brief summary of the definitions of theory and theoretical frameworks, particularly in relation to methodology, and a wide variety of distinctive, sometimes unusual, theoretical frameworks drawn from a number of disciplines are included. The subsequent chapters present examples of studies by some of today’s leading qualitative researchers, all of whom are advocates for further discussion regarding the role and function of theoretical frameworks in qualitative research. The book provides background for beginning researchers about the nature of theoretical frameworks and their importance in qualitative research; about differences in perspective about the role of theoretical frameworks; and about how to find and use a theoretical framework for one’s study. In addition to providing guidance regarding integration of theoretical frameworks into solid research designs, this book initiates a thought-provoking discussion about the complexities involved in developing an appropriate theoretical framework.

Cooper, H. (2017). *Research synthesis and meta-analysis: A step by step approach* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

This text includes discussion around the complex issues in conducting a literature review, with a particular focus on research synthesis in the social and behavioral sciences. Presenting a trustworthy and convincing integration of the research literature is a task that has profound

implications for the accumulation of knowledge. State-of-the-art research synthesis has indeed been impacted by the growth in the amount of research and the rapid advances in computerized research retrieval systems. Developing a list of trustworthy research articles on a topic of interest involves lengthy and tedious scrutiny of available items. The book is written in plain language with four running examples drawn from psychology, education, and health science. The focus is on the basic tenets of sound data gathering with the task of producing a comprehensive integration of past research on a topic. The author highlights critical questions pertaining to gathering information from studies, establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria, evaluating the quality of studies, analyzing and interpreting the outcome of studies, and synthesizing information. With ample coverage of literature searching and the technical aspects of meta-analysis, this one-of-a-kind book applies the basic principles of sound data gathering to the task of producing a comprehensive assessment of existing research. The book includes chapter-ending exercises and questions about best practices to prepare readers to conduct their own research syntheses.

Ravitch, S. M., & Riggan, M. (2017). *Reason and rigor: How conceptual frameworks guide research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

This book presents conceptual frameworks as a method for aligning research design, literature review, and methodology. The authors explore the notion of a conceptual framework—defined both as a process and a product—that helps to direct and ground researchers as they confront common research challenges. Focusing on published studies on a range of topics, and employing both qualitative and quantitative methods, the updated second edition features two new chapters that clearly communicate the processes of developing and defining conceptual frameworks. The authors illustrate how developing a conceptual framework is part of the process through which researchers identify questions and key lines of inquiry, develop appropriate data collection strategies for pursuing these questions, and monitor and critically reflect on their own thinking and understanding. The book provides direction regarding making use of existing knowledge (theory, concepts, methods, and empirical research) in combination with emergent observation and experience in an endeavor to ask deeper questions, develop robust and justifiable strategies for exploring those questions, present and contextualize research findings, and explain the significance and limitations thereof. Included are examples from research studies of prominent researchers and scholars from different fields and disciplines. These examples, paired with the authors' insight and reflections on the research process, vividly illustrate how conceptual frameworks inform research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and write-up of the study.

Wallace, M., & Wray, A. (2016). *Critical reading and writing for postgraduates* (3rd ed.). London, England: Sage.

Each aspect of a dissertation merits its own critical literature review. You should expect to critically engage with literature in justifying your investigation of the substantive topic, your choice of theoretical orientation to frame your research, the methodological approach and detailed methods through which you gather your data, and the interpretation of your findings. Reference to this literature is made at various points during your investigation and within your written manuscript. As these authors explain, critical literature reviews reflect the intellect of the reviewer, who has decided the focus, selected texts for review, engaged critically with and interpreted the text, synthesized what was found, and made a convincing argument. Overall, this is a very useful text that clearly signposts a route through the pathways involved in

critiquing not only research sources in your field of study but also the “right” sources. The book approaches this in two ways: First, it develops an ability to critically ask questions of a chosen research source in order to help the reader determine its suitability, rigor, level of authority of findings, and conclusions; second, it develops a reflective and self-critical approach to the reader’s own research and writing in order to produce a strong research paper or proposal that meets required standards. The volume is carefully structured so as to enable students to apply ideas suggested in the progressive development of their skills of critical analysis and appreciation, while providing illustrative example critiques of texts that encompass disciplinary areas including linguistics, education, business and management. The book’s companion website contains additional useful exercises and templates.

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