



THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding different
types of literature

Books

Textbooks



What? Textbooks present the state of knowledge in a field of study. They will provide a general overview of the topic or discipline, highlighting the principal ideas, developments and authors. Peer reviewed*.



Useful for? They are helpful for defining key terms and identifying the different arguments, perspectives and themes in an area.

Edited Collections



What? Also known as anthologies or readers, edited collections consist of chapters by different authors. They bring together a range of contributions around a particular topic or theme. Peer reviewed.



Useful for? They can help you explore different angles, theoretical perspectives or research studies that have been conducted around the topic.

Monographs



What? Monographs report upon a specific primary research study at length. They may have a similar structure to a traditional thesis or dissertation. Peer reviewed.



Useful for? Monographs help you understand the finer details of primary studies. This includes the underpinning literature, justification for methods, techniques to collect and analyze data, detailed findings and how the researcher(s) reached their conclusions. They are particularly useful for understanding methodology, as monographs include much more detail about this part of the research process than other types of literature.

*"Peer reviewed" means that the item has been scrutinized by a panel of experts from the discipline. This makes it more likely that the knowledge contained within the item is accurate, valid and reliable. In other words, peer-reviewed items carry more status, prestige and general clout than non peer-reviewed literature!



Journal Articles

Empirical / Research Articles



What? Empirical / research articles report on a specific piece of research. They tell the story of the research from the literature review, to the methods, through data collection, findings, analysis and discussion of results. They cover similar ground to a monograph, but in less detail. Peer reviewed.



Useful for? Like research monographs, they can help you understand a range of relevant elements of the research process for a single study. However, they tend to include less detail about methodology than a monograph.

Theoretical Articles



What? Theoretical articles do not report upon a specific piece of research. Instead, the author(s) draw upon existing literature (which may include empirical / research articles) to develop new ideas. These articles often propose new theoretical frameworks, or new ways of understanding the literature. Peer reviewed.



Useful for? They are helpful for 'zooming out' to look at the bigger picture and think about concepts, theories and how ideas relate to one another. As such, they can assist you in identifying broader, overarching themes across a body of literature.



'Grey' Literature



What? Grey literature sits outside of the traditional academic publishing process within which books and journal articles are produced. It encompasses a range of sources, including reports from voluntary sector organizations, non-profits, charities and government departments. Not likely to be peer-reviewed.



Useful for? As it doesn't go through a lengthy peer-review process, this literature can be more current and up to date. It may also cover areas that are more specialist and niche. There may not be a body of academic literature around the topic. It may be less popular, or under-researched within the academic community for a number of reasons (e.g., difficulty in securing academic funding). As such, organizations with a specific interest in the topic will undertake their own research.



Be careful! Whilst the lack of an academic peer-review process can be an advantage in that this type of literature is more current, this can result in variable quality. The reader (i.e., you!) must make their own assessment of the reliability, validity and potential bias. Sources from this type of literature may be written from a particular position or standpoint on an issue or topic.



Other sources

Mainstream News Media Content



What? Includes items like print or online newspaper articles, and broadcast television or radio news.



Useful for? Can be helpful for finding out basic details about current events or overviews of positions around debates and issues.



Be careful! Be aware of any potential biases in the reporting.

Biographies or Personal Blogs



What? These may be individual websites where people share their views and experiences, or social media accounts.



Useful for? Can give insights into, and help understand, individual, lived experiences around a particular subject or topic.



Be careful! Whilst a personalized, unique experience may be valuable for some types of research, others may view it as potentially biased, unreliable and not generalizable.

Official Statistics



What? Published statistics collected by official government agencies and ministries.



Useful for? Can help you gauge the prevalence, scale or trends relating to a topic.



Be careful! Always think critically about official statistics. To what extent are they a true and accurate representation of what is actually going on? What factors might have an impact on their validity or reliability?

