GUIDELINES FOR WRITING THE LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the most perplexing moments in undertaking a search of the literature is finding a point of departure that will lead you to the significant research studies in your field. Start by inspecting certain general works; abstracts, indexes, and accessible online databases. Remember, everything that you read needs to be recorded.

The literature review needs to be planned and organized (structure, unity and coherence). Reviewing the literature does not mean simply reproducing it, but showing the relatedness of the literature to the research project.

A literature review offers a synthesis of:
1. What has already been written on the topic
2. What has not been written on that topic (or is written in such a way that it is conceptually or methodologically inadequate)
3. How the researcher's proposal addresses the 'gap', silence or weakness in the existing knowledge base.

Planning the literature review
1. Write your problem at the top of the page where you cannot lose sight of it.
2. Dissect the problem by numbering its various subparts.
3. Divide the page into two columns by drawing a vertical line down the middle of the page.
4. Cite each specific study in the left-hand column.
5. Opposite each study not the subdivision of the problem to which the study relates, and also the rationale for including it in the review of the literature.
6. Gather together all the citations that refer to a particular aspect of the problem, so that you have as many groups as you have subdivisions of your main problem.
7. Study these groups in relation to each other, with the view of planning the literature review.
8. Write the review. Head each section with headings which reflect the words found in the statement of the problem.

Example of an excerpt from a literature review on the topic of effective schools

The existing research on effective schools has been based on:
1. 'Input-output' models applied to
2. large survey studies (50 or more schools) of
3. American and British schools.

The literature is limited in that it fails to:
1. Pinpoint the in-school processes or transactions which make schools effective or ineffective, or
2. offer in-depth descriptions of a few schools, or
3. explain school effectiveness in developing countries.

My research will therefore provide detailed case studies of five effective schools in southern Africa with a focus on the processes or interactions within schools and classrooms that explain 'effectiveness'.

Observe that the researcher uses three limitations in the existing literature on effective schools to justify her research focus:
1. a methodological limitation - using large survey studies;
2. a contextual limitation - applied only in British and American schools;
3. a conceptual limitation - using input-output studies.

References