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# The Challenges of Writing an Effective Literature Review for Students and new Researchers of Business

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**Abstract:** The literature review is a key part of a dissertation or journal paper, yet it is also one of the areas that is often the most challenging. The multidisciplinary nature of business and management studies adds to the demands of writing a critical review by deciding which theories, subject areas and texts to interrogate. There are a number of approaches that students and academics might take in writing a literature review that require a differing approach, resources and timeframe. The purpose of this conference paper is to review the literature and develop an understanding of the complexities and challenges faced both by students and new researchers in preparing journal papers. We share our experience as faculty with teaching and writing at undergraduate and postgraduate level, and identify a number of the problems typically faced. Recent trends with regard to the proliferation of open access journals are outlined, and a journal Editor addresses common mistakes that lead to poor submissions and reviews. A popular business school text is amongst those views considered. Specialist types of software for analysis associated with the complexities of Systematic literature reviews are also outlined. We close with guidelines for success and conclusions. More research is encouraged as students now have fewer opportunities to develop the skills required for critical writing.

**Keywords:** type of literature review, critical review, systematic reviews, narrative reviews

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Why do students find it a challenge?

Over the past two years we have experienced a continuum of student responses to the requirement to develop an effective literature review (LR). New researchers continue to face challenges in publishing their work, often receiving criticism of the LR. In this paper we aim to identify choices in approach and lessons within the business and management studies field of study. Similarly, our experience of teaching research methods and supervising students in preparing dissertations has revealed a wide range of ability and interest. More recently a growing level of disinterest in undertaking a project and learning research skills has become apparent (Brown and Rich, 2020; Mitchell and Rich, 2020, Mitchell and Rich, 2021). The popularity and recent growth in eBusiness may mean that assumptions underpinning a traditional Business School curriculum cease to exist, or at least are challenged. We are concerned in this paper that the manner in which students and novice researchers, prepare LRs has changed; and we wish to explore how open access publication and student expectations have made an impact see Bennis and O'Toole (2005) and other critiques of Business Schools.

#### 1.1.1 Objectives

We appreciate that a broad range of people embark on Business and Management studies, some have commercial or industrial experience but typically lack research training and skills. PhD students and new researchers continue to be under pressure to publish. These assumptions inform the following objectives:

- Review literature to better understand the issues some have with writing LRs.
- Consider our experience as academics and that of journal editors in identifying the criteria for an effective LR.
- Identify several of the different approaches to writing a LR.
- Appreciate the differing timescales and resource requirements that are necessary.
- Develop guidelines for success.

#### 1.1.2 Structure of this paper

The paper explores the experience of academics in teaching students to write LRs (2.1) as well as an editor in reviewing journal papers (2.3) Different approaches to writing a LR are considered (3.0) along with software and technology support (4.0). Finally, some guidelines (5.0) are developed along with interim conclusions. In this way

we address the experiences of both students writing a literature review, often for the first time; and the frustrations that researchers sometimes experience with submitting journal papers, particularly given the various stylistic approaches to a literature review that are available.

**1.2 Multidisciplinary nature of business and management studies**

The multidisciplinary nature of business and management studies adds to the demands of writing a critical review and deciding which theories, subject areas and texts to interrogate. This is particularly true of strategic, operational and organisational issues where material would be drawn from a range of traditional functional subjects that require integration and careful interpretation. Business and management students and writers therefore need to cast their net wider than those of a ‘pure’ science, politics, language etc. However, this is contested as other subject areas will make similar claims. For example, with medicine knowledge of developments in molecular biology, genetics and pharmacology (Collins and Fauser, 2005). In economics a knowledge of politics, sociology, geography may be required to research supply chain, outsourcing and offshoring decisions (Mitchell, 2016).

**2. Experience with teaching students and submitting journal papers**

**2.1 Faculty experience**

The authors have many years of experience at a number of schools of teaching research methods, project supervision and as directors of MBA, MSc and BSc programmes. With ‘Executive’ MBA programmes (typically 5 years work experience), a number of students may already have a PhD, and then experience little difficulty with writing a LR and managing the project process (see Table 1 below for a summary). However, some do lack enthusiasm for this area of study and may neither enjoy the experience nor see the relevance. In recent years a number of taught master degree courses have revised the syllabus to include more group work, live case studies and simulations. As a result, there may be fewer individual assignments with less academic focus, and hence fewer opportunities for students to practice writing a LR, drafting research questions, designing a methodology, collecting and analysing data. Writing a LR is a daunting task for some. An online module (or taught alternative) on academic skills should be taught prior to a research methods module. There are also a range of affordable ‘pocket books’ available on study skills that are most instructive. Bayes Business School stress in their guidance to undergraduates that writing a LR and dissertation is different from an essay in that it needs to have a distinctive, critical and analytical component. Table 1 is a summary of some of our experiences and the differences at Masters and Bachelor level.

**Table 1:** Comparison of postgraduate and undergraduate business and management students (authors)

	<b>Postgraduate</b>	<b>Undergraduate</b>
<b>Experience/ qualifications</b>	Those with research degrees and previous experience struggle less with writing a LR.	Some recognise the importance for future employment e.g. consultancy, research agencies.
<b>Timing</b>	Early clarity on the topic and research question(s) helps with writing the LR, keeping on track and following the logical sequence of the dissertation.	Use of an option for a shorter 5000 words project (instead of 10000). Other options also becoming popular.
<b>Significance of LR</b>	Often 20% of the dissertation and regarded as a key chapter.	The LR may be 30% of the marks in a full dissertation. Some students prefer something more ‘practical’ and less abstract. Many doubt the need for a LR if the project is to develop a business plan and struggle to identify contingent areas of literature.
<b>Practice</b>	May not be a chance to practice with assignments as more group work and live cases dominate the curriculum.	One week teaching usually as part of a research methods module, examples and case studies.
<b>Style</b>	Not linear and descriptive, but thematic, comparative and critical.	Some writing workshops available as an option. The choice of supervisor is significant with regard to personal approach and level of commitment.
<b>References</b>	Select by theme and key word, check abstract before selecting.	Less experienced with search techniques using key words and theme headings.

For secondary research the purpose of the LR is to summarise, synthesise and analyse the arguments of others also to critically assess the knowledge that exists and what gaps occur in research related to the field of interest. This should clarify the relationship with the student’s research and reveal consistencies, inconsistencies and

controversies with previous research. The LR should guide the subsequent development of an appropriate methodology design and subsequent data collection. The order for action learning and grounded theory approaches are often different but less usual for business and management students. Once relevant papers have been identified (ideally grouped by theme) they should be '*superficially scanned*' and the abstract reviewed to check the paper's suitability in answering the research questions before reading the paper more closely (Table 1 above). Those papers that do not 'fit' the research questions ought to be discarded rather than used to extend the list of references. Developing a draft list of references alongside the LR helps to keep track of sources especially as increasing use is made of online media. Comparing, contrasting and critiquing different authors on a particular topic helps to make the LR more interesting to read as well as avoiding the trappings of plagiarism. A synthesis at the end of a LR helps to highlight the key messages, cross reference the relevant sources and develop a link to the methodology section.

Each year at Bayes Business School, a small number of undergraduate students interested in CSR write their projects in collaboration with the CSR function of an employer. It is hoped to develop this option and offer it to students interested in other areas. While this is a different format, it is very clearly offered as a research activity and students are expected to carry out a LR. The employer is the source of primary data for the project.

## **2.2 Academic Texts.**

A seminal text at Business Schools for research methods offers helpful insight on critical writing (Saunders, 2019 based on Mingers, 2000). Four aspects are identified encouraging students to be sceptical towards rhetoric, tradition, authority, and objectivity (Mingers, 2000). Being critical in reviewing the literature is a combination of skills and the manner with which the text is read and interpreted (Saunders, 2019). This means that students should constantly consider and justify their own critical stance. This takes practice and considerable effort, especially if the student has little experience of writing LRs. Business students will find that subject areas, themes, strands, theories, overlap with one another (Danson and Arshad, 2014). For example, in marketing studies, opportunity and creativity are themes to be understood to develop marketing plans. However, opportunity and creativity themes are also discussed in entrepreneurship when seeking gaps in the market and developing a business plan to address the gap. It is imperative that the LR is clear and consistent over such issues.

## **2.3 Journal editor**

A student wishing to develop a good quality dissertation may also submit to a journal paper. Sometimes this is done in conjunction with a supervisor. PhD students have always been encouraged to publish, and an awareness of the challenges set by the peer review process and journal editors is part of the preparation for a career in academia. It is becoming harder, and arguably taking longer to get papers reviewed and published in 'traditional leading' journals. The views of an editor are helpful in this regard (Jennex, 2015) as it has been suggested that the quality of many LRs is declining (Table 2 below). There has also been a huge rise in open access journals to support global access to research. Some open access journals are labelled as 'predatory' and frowned upon (<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-03759-y>), although the distinction is often unclear. This creates confusion amongst researchers (especially those relatively new) and is unfair to those open access journals that do add value and meet a genuine market need. Technology has also impacted the manner in which researchers search for relevant papers and the way they reference and check scripts for plagiarism. Reviewers are encouraged to provide feedback in a positive and constructive manner to address complaints by authors for many years.

Other common mistakes (Jennex, 2015) include authors not having access to relevant papers, weak search criteria, not using original source material, failure to synthesize material and translation issues for non-native speakers. Early career academics suffer the same problem as undergraduates and other specialist students, that more structured guidance would be beneficial.

**Table 2:** Reasons why reviewers to decline papers (adapted from Jennex, 2015)

<b>Content</b>	The review must be limited to studies that have bearing on its specific research question.
<b>Journals</b>	The scope of the review might limit itself to high-quality journals, or journals in a particularly field of study.
<b>Authors</b>	The study might be restricted to works by certain prominent authors.
<b>Setting</b>	Only studies conducted with specific industries or regions are considered.
<b>Participants or subjects</b>	Studies may be restricted to subjects of a certain gender, work situation, age, or other criteria.
<b>Program or intervention</b>	There might be a distinction made between data that is self-reported versus researcher-measured, or if subjects are self-selected into various groups.
<b>Research design or sampling methodology</b>	Studies might be excluded based on not using a particular research design. Date of publication or of data collection, or duration of data collection
<b>Date of publication</b>	Studies will often be restricted to certain date ranges for data collection, or duration of data collection.
<b>Source of financial support</b>	Studies might be restricted to those receiving non-private funds unless there is a concern that this might be a source of bias in the results.

### 3. Different approaches to writing a literature review

The traditional or critical narrative style is generally a starting point for students and academics. Different professions favour various styles of LR, as with medical research where in-depth structured evidence is the most common example of systematic LR approaches. There are other styles, and we use the key ones summarised below in Table 3 and in more detail in 3.1 to 3.3. Other approaches tend to be variants, although agreement on the types of approach and descriptions is contested, Danson and Arshad (2014) suggest that over the years, numerous types of LRs have emerged and consider the four main types to be traditional or narrative, systematic, meta-analysis and meta-synthesis. An important distinction is the time typically required and the resources available. A narrative LR 1- 4 weeks, usually by one person whereas a systematic review is more likely to be in excess of 6 months with a small team of researchers that require extensive library facilities. Specialist technical support for data search, storage and analysis may also be required (4.0) below.

**Table 3:** Types of Literature Review. Adapted from: Grant and Booth (2009)

<b>Approach</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Narrative</b>	Generic term: published materials that provide examination of recent or current literature. Can cover wide range of subjects at various levels of completeness and comprehensiveness. May include research findings. Also referred to as 'narrative' style.
<b>Scoping review</b>	Preliminary assessment of potential size and scope of available research literature. Aims to identify nature and extent of research evidence (usually including ongoing research).
<b>Systematic review</b>	Seeks to systematically search for, appraise and synthesize research evidence, often adhering to guidelines on the conduct of a review.

The clarity, validity and auditability with which a LR is developed are key tests of how systematic a process the LR is irrespective of whether it is a simple scoping, a traditional narrative or more comprehensive systematic review (Booth et al, 2021). It is too easy for bias to arise whereby papers are rejected that propose an alternative argument. Resources and time are likely to be constraints, so it is important to fully outline any limitations in the chosen approach.

#### 3.1 Narrative

Saunders (2019) suggests that it is necessary to have clearly defined research question(s) and parameters for the literature search, as well as key words or themes. The literature search may include tertiary sources and the Internet, following up references in articles previously read; scanning and browsing secondary literature. The literature should be synthesised for relevance to the research question(s) and key messages that subsequently inform the methodology. Narrative reviews may be comprehensive and cover a wide range of issues within a given topic, but do not necessarily follow prescribed rules regarding the search for evidence or decisions about relevance and validity. The majority of LRs are narrative rather than systematic (Collins and Fauser, 2005).

#### 3.2 Scoping

Scoping reviews help to determine the coverage of a body of literature on a given topic and give clear indication of the volume of literature and studies available (Mann and Peters et al 2018). Scoping reviews are useful for

examining emerging evidence when it is still unclear what other, more specific questions can be posed and valuably addressed by a more precise systematic review. They can report the types of evidence that address and inform practice in the field and the way the research has been conducted. Scoping reviews are an increasingly popular methodology to synthesise evidence that can be influential for policy and practice (Colquhoun et al, 2014). However, variability in the labelling, definition, methodology, and reporting currently exists, which limits their potential. The purpose may include identifying the types of available evidence, the key concepts/ definitions; an examination of how research is conducted on a certain topic, the key characteristics or factors related to a concept or knowledge gaps (Mann and Peters et al 2018) . May be used in preparation for a more detailed systematic review.

### **3.3 Systematic**

Systematic reviews use explicit methods to methodically search, critically appraise and synthesize literature on a specific issue (Collins and Fauser, 2005). The systematic review attempts to reduce reviewer bias through objective, reproducible criteria to select relevant individual publications and assess their validity. A systematic review may include a meta-analysis or statistical summary of individual study results. The aggregate of effects from several studies yields an average that is more precise than individual study results. Thus, the systematic review involves explicit, transparent methods which are clearly stated, and reproducible by others. For some review topics, however, the strengths of the systematic review may turn into weaknesses. The primary problem is that the narrow focus and prescribed methods of the systematic review do not allow for comprehensive coverage. Unlikely to be suitable for students or new academics with limited time and resources where a traditional narrative review, in which less explicit methods are the trade-off for broader coverage. Every step of the review, including the search, must be documented for reproducibility. Systematic reviews are most commonly associated with medicine and clinical trials (Georgetown University Dahlgren Memorial Library) Publication bias can cause positive results to become exaggerated as medical researchers are less likely / reluctant to submit bad results. Other fields include IT and more recently HR, operations and supply chain management.

## **4. Use of Software / Technology**

Students usually have access to Google Scholar and university library databases and should be encouraged to use them. MAXQDA may be helpful for developing a comprehensive LR. It works with a wide range of data types and offers powerful tools for LRs, such as reference management, qualitative, vocabulary, and text analysis tools, and more. Highly structured approaches e.g. Systematic LRs, require the use of specialist software and Technology (Carcary, 2018) particularly where a large volume of studies is involved. The use of Computer-assisted (or aided) qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) offer tools that assist with qualitative research such as transcription analysis, coding and text interpretation, recursive abstraction, content analysis, discourse analysis, grounded theory methodology. Optimal searches in systematic reviews could search Embase, MEDLINE and Web of Science as a minimum requirement to guarantee adequate and efficient coverage. Most universities have access to this software which is necessary for the highly detailed data analytics associated with the large number of papers.

**Table 4:** Comparison of Traditional v Systematic Literature Review approaches (adapted from Ferrari (2015); Collins and Fauser (2005) and University of Alabama

	<b>Traditional</b>	<b>Systematic</b>
<b>Authors</b>	One or more authors usually experts in the topic.	Two or more authors are involved in good quality systematic reviews, may comprise experts in the different stages.
<b>Protocol</b>	No study protocols.	Written protocol that includes details of the methods to be used.
<b>Research Question</b>	Range from broad to specific, hypothesis not stated.	Specific question that may have all or some of PICO components e.g. medical research (Population, Intervention, Comparator, and Outcome). Hypothesis is stated.
<b>Search Strategy</b>	No detailed search strategy, search is probably conducted using keywords.	Detailed and comprehensive search strategy is developed.
<b>Sources of Literature</b>	Not usually stated and non-exhaustive, usually well-known articles. Prone to publication bias.	List of databases, websites and other sources of included studies are listed. Published and unpublished literature are considered.
<b>Selection Criteria</b>	No specific selection criteria, usually subjective. Prone to selection bias.	<b>Specific inclusion and exclusion criteria.</b>
<b>Critical appraisal</b>	Variable evaluation of study quality or method.	<b>Rigorous appraisal of study quality.</b>
<b>Synthesis</b>	<b>Often qualitative synthesis of evidence.</b>	Narrative, quantitative or qualitative synthesis.
<b>Conclusions</b>	Sometimes evidence based but can be influenced by author’s personal belief.	Conclusions drawn are evidence based.
<b>Reproducibility</b>	Findings cannot be reproduced. Conclusions may be subjective.	<b>Accurate documentation of method means results can be reproduced</b>
<b>Update</b>	<b>Cannot be continuously updated.</b>	Systematic reviews can be periodically updated to include new evidence

## 5. Guidelines for success

Having reviewed some of the challenges, issues and alternatives we are left with the question of ‘how to decide on what approach to use?’ (Snyder, 2019) for a specific type of review. The project research question(s) and purpose of the review should determine the right strategy to use.

**Table 5:** Defining characteristics of traditional literature reviews, scoping reviews and systematic reviews adapted from Adapted from:

<https://bmcmmedresmethodol.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12874-018-0611-x/tables/1>

	<b>Traditional Literature Reviews</b>	<b>Scoping reviews</b>	<b>Systematic reviews</b>
<b>A priori review protocol</b>	No	Yes (some)	Yes
<b>PROSPERO registration of the review protocol</b>	No	No	Yes
<b>Explicit, transparent, peer reviewed search strategy</b>	No (journal dependent)	Yes	Yes
<b>Standardized data extraction forms</b>	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Mandatory Critical Appraisal (Risk of Bias Assessment)</b>	Maybe (should be)	Maybe (should be)	Yes
<b>Synthesis of findings from individual studies and the generation of ‘summary’ findings</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes

While the systematic review is perhaps the most accurate and rigorous approach to collect articles with certainty that all relevant data have been covered, this approach requires a narrow research question, and might not be feasible or even suitable for all types of projects. This is where a scoping review can be useful, but this approach is also problematic. While the methodology for systematic reviews is straightforward the scoping review process requires tailoring to the specific project. Researchers need to develop their own standards and a detailed plan to ensure the appropriate literature is covered to both answer the research question and be transparent about the process. However, if done properly, this can be a highly effective way of covering more areas and broader



topics than a systematic review can handle. In addition, when it comes to the narrative review, it becomes even more demanding, which puts more responsibility on and requires more skills of the researchers, as there are fewer standards and guidelines for developing a strategy. There is a contradiction here in that for students this is usually seen as the most straightforward and common choice. However, successfully conducting a critical, thematic review and contributing with a new conceptual model or theory, can be significant reward and suit most purposes.

## **6. Conclusion**

Objective 1.1.2a:-Undergraduates find the process of writing a LR demanding if they have received little training in research methods, and have had few opportunities to practice critical writing of a LR with assignments and course work. Exploring what has gone before, finding gaps in literature, identifying relevant theory are important aspects of research. Critical writing, thematic literature search, comparisons of literature is an important skill. Postgraduates often have an advantage especially if they have previously experienced a research degree (2.1).

Objective 1.1.2b: As students, an ability to summarise, synthesise, interpret and justify arguments is key to producing a good LR. As academics, submitting papers to journals can be a demanding process where common mistakes include not having access to relevant papers, weak search criteria, not the using original source material, failure to synthesize the material and translation issues for non-native speakers (2.1-2.3).

Objective 1.1.2c: A key message is the need for an appreciation of critical skills writing, and the possibility that students today may have less chance to write a LR in advance of a dissertation (1.1). There are a number of distinct approaches plus variants that have become popular over the years. Choice of the most popular types is contested and here we have chosen narrative, scoping and systematic. In fields such as medicine, the rigour and ability to repeat and check experimental data makes systematic approaches a clear leader. There are examples of a systematic approach bring taken within business and management e.g. IT and Operations, but this choice is for those who are experienced academics with time, library, budget and software resources. For students with broader research questions and scope a traditional narrative style is in some respects simpler and is commended (3.0).

Objective 1.1.2d: An important distinction is the time and resources that are available. A narrative LR 1- 4 weeks, usually by one person whereas a systematic review is more likely to be in excess of 6 months and with a small team of researchers requiring extensive library facilities. Specialist technical support for data search, storage and analysis may also be required. Software includes MAXQDA, and CAQDAS, see 4.0 (Carcary, 2018).

Objective 1.1.2e: The choice of approach is dependent upon the aim, scope, research questions and experience of the writer. A systematic style is the most rigorous and designed so that reported experiments can be repeated and results checked. However, it is highly structured, time and resource intensive, and requires experience. For students a narrative or traditional style is still demanding but more suitable for business projects (5.0).

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