

# Synthesising the literature as part of a literature review

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## Abstract

This article examines how to synthesise and critique research literature. To place the process of synthesising the research literature into context, the article explores the critiquing process by breaking it down into seven sequential steps. The article explains how and why these steps need to be kept in mind if a robust comprehensive literature search and analysis are to be achieved. The article outlines how to engage in the critiquing process and explains how the literature review needs to be assembled to generate a logical and reasoned debate to examine a topic of interest or research in more detail.

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## Keywords

Critical analysis, critique, evaluation, integrative review, literature review, literature search, research, research question, search strategy, synthesis

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A LITERATURE REVIEW is a strategic and critical analysis of what has been written about a topic. It is not a summary of what has been published regarding a particular topic; nor is it a date-ordered description of published articles. A literature review can be likened to a type of research study in its own right (Cooper 1982). The analysis and subsequent synthesis of the literature usually draws on data located in academic, research-based, peer-reviewed journals, research reports, books, policy documents, protocols, information sheets and expert opinion papers. Further sources of evidence that might be included in the critical analysis can be drawn from the grey literature represented by conference papers, essays, dissertations and theses. The extent to which these sources might be included as additional forms of evidence within a literature review will vary depending on the purpose of the review and the level of access to such materials it is possible to attain (Cooper 1998, Lipsey and Wilson 2001). In addition, access to these materials depends on financial and human resources.

If time and money are no object then more obscure sources of evidence and also sources in languages other than English might be accessible for review. Conversely, if the scope of a study or review is limited by time, or the review is being undertaken by a single researcher with no access to a realistic budget, then a more limited review will be all that can be achieved. It is important to determine such operational limitations at the outset as it sets the review in context. For example, a literature review undertaken as part of an undergraduate dissertation is likely to be much more limited than one undertaken as part of a doctoral study or to justify a fully funded research project supported by a large research team.

Irrespective of the extent of the review process, its overriding purpose is to present an in-depth examination of the main themes isolated from the data sources accessed, while simultaneously establishing the reliability, credibility and trustworthiness of the sources of information targeted. Consequently, it is vital that the