As indicated in the previous topic, a literature review should be based on a critical assessment of the literature on a topic. However, it should consist of more than just critical summaries of individual studies. Instead, a literature review should be a synthesis—providing a whole picture of what is known and what is not known as well as an attempt to show how diverse pieces of information fit together and make sense.

A key to creating a synthesis is to write a review that moves from subtopic to subtopic (not from one study to another), while citing whatever studies are relevant for each topic. See Example 3 in Topic 16 for an example of a topic outline for writing a literature review.

To further the creation of a synthesis, the writer of a review should explicitly point out major trends and commonalities in the results of previous research. Example 1 illustrates how this might be done.

**Example 1**

People tend to become entrapped in previously chosen situations and throw away good money after bad decisions. As a result, ultimate losses are heavily increased. This has been demonstrated as a reliable and robust phenomenon (Bazerman, Giuliano, & Appelman, 1984; Brockner, 1992; Brockner & Rubin, 1985; Garland, 1990; Staw, 1976, 1997; Teger, 1980). Laboratory findings and field studies simply confirm what has been noted as a recurrent tragedy in everyday life...

In addition, when there are major discrepancies in results, they should be pointed out, and possible explanations for the discrepancies should be noted. Example 2 points out an important difference in the samples used in the studies.

**Example 2**

While the studies described above support the prediction that X is greater than Y in samples of college students, a recent study of young adolescents found no difference in X and Y. It may be that X and Y operate differently within different age groups.

A whole picture of the literature on a research topic should also explicitly point out gaps in the literature, which is illustrated in Example 3. Note that the purpose of research is often to fill a gap found in the literature.

**Example 3**

Despite the important contributions of previous studies on concerns about safety, risk perception, and fear of crime at school, most of [this literature focuses] primarily on student experiences. Few studies, in contrast, have examined fear and perceptions of safety in the school environment among teachers.

To facilitate providing readers with an overview, writers of reviews should avoid giving extensive, detailed descriptions of the research methodology used in each study. In other words, it is usually not necessary to provide details on how studies were conducted. The main exceptions are when the writer of the review wants to document a particular weakness in a study being cited (e.g., use of a small, unrepresentative sample), or when the details of the methodology might help to explain why two studies on the same topic arrived at substantially different results.

In addition, one or more paragraphs (or even whole sections) might be devoted to describing a particular author's written work when the work is central to one or more points being made in the literature review.

Because direct quotations break the flow of a presentation, they should be used very sparingly. Quotations normally should be used only for (1) presenting especially well-crafted definitions of key terms, (2) presenting concepts that are explained especially well with a particular set of words, and (3) clarifying differences of opinion in the literature when seeing that the differences in wording (such as the wording of theories) might help readers to understand the issues involved.

The flow of presentation can be facilitated through the use of appropriate transitional terms and phrases (e.g., “however,” “as a consequence,” and “indeed”) both within and at the beginning of paragraphs.

Finally, a brief summary of the literature review placed at the end of a review can help readers to grasp the whole of the literature review.

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