Writing a Literature Review Assignment

This workshop will:

- Provide information on how to handle content and structure of a literature review assignment.
- Offer tips on how to assemble findings from the literature into an essay-style format.
- Introduce you to basic elements of good practice when drafting the finished paper.

Teaching Point:

1. What is a literature review assignment?
2. What is in a literature review assignment
3. Structuring literature reviews
4. Moving from analytical notes to written work
5. Maintaining academic style
This workshop focuses on writing-up a literature review. For advice and information on how to undertake a review of literature, please attend our workshop, contact us or visit our website. Your Subject Librarian will also provide support on searching for literature. Their website is:

www.bradford.ac.uk/library

1. **What is a literature review assignment?**

A literature review...

- Summarises by reducing the key elements into a short but full version.
- Analyses by breaking down the text, looking how one element relates to another and to the whole, looking for relevance to the initial research question.
- Synthesises which is the opposite of analysis as you bring things together, taking from one source or section of a source and relating it to another to create something new.

'An intelligent appraisal of a range of sources that in some way extracts the key messages and accounts for them in the context of an overarching statement or idea…with a beginning [outline of the issues], middle [analysis and synthesis] and end [summarising the issues, differences, paradoxes, dilemmas and questions to be resolved]'

(Thomas, 2013: 64)

**Activity 1: What does a review achieve?**

Read the extract below and, working in pairs, jot down the key aims of the review. Identify what each paragraph does and where the four key elements are that should be in all literature reviews are in this article. These are:

- To clearly state the aim/s of the research, and the topic or field the research is in.
- To highlight any doubt or debate in the area under discussion.
- List and discuss the key elements or considerations in the field.
- Offers a definition of the topic/concept/model/etc. under discussion.
A taxonomy of the characteristics of student peer mentors in higher education: findings from a literature review

Jenepher Lennox Terrion* and Dominique Leonard
University of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Abstract
Peer mentoring in higher education is regarded as an effective intervention to ensure the success and retention of vulnerable students. Many universities and colleges have therefore implemented some form of mentoring program as part of their student support services. While considerable research supports the use of peer mentoring to improve academic performance and decrease student attrition, few studies link peer mentoring functions with the type of peer best suited to fulfil these functions. This literature review categorizes the abundant student peer mentor descriptors found in mentoring research. The result is a preliminary taxonomy that classifies ten peer mentor characteristics according to mentoring function served (career-related or psychosocial). The proposed taxonomy and the discussion developed in this article help shed light on the dynamics of successful student peer mentoring relationships in higher education.

University and college administrators have long sought to identify the support mechanisms necessary to improve the retention, academic success, and educational experience of their students. Peer mentoring, in which qualified students provide guidance and support to vulnerable students to enable them to navigate through their education (Kram, 1983), is regarded as an effective intervention to ensure these outcomes (Freedman, 1993; Johnson, 2002; Kram, 1983; McLean, 2004; Pagan & Edwards-Wilson, 2002; Topping, 1996). Given this potential, many universities and colleges have implemented some form of peer mentoring, peer helping, or tutoring program as part of their student support services (Jacobi, 1991; Johnson, 2002; Tinto, 1998).

Peer mentoring is based on the traditional mentoring model, in which an older, more experienced person serves one of two main functions: a task-related or career-related function (providing advice, support, and information related to task accomplishment, professional development, and career success); or a psychosocial function (providing emotional and psychological support) (Kram & Isabella, 1985). In her review of the literature on mentoring, Jacobi (1991) supports this dual-function model of mentoring and reports that the studies she reviewed also tended to group functions in two similar categories, with some variation in the labels given to the functions. For example, the career-related function has also been referred to as the instrumental and vocational function, while the psychosocial function has been alternately described as the intrinsic function. Jacobi also notes that dissent exists about the nature of role modelling in mentoring: Some researchers, such as Kram (1983), place it under the
psychosocial function, whereas others recognize it as a distinct function, thereby according it an entirely separate category.

The traditional form of mentoring consists of a hierarchical relationship in which the mentor is considerably older and more experienced than the mentee. However, Kram and Isabella (1985) have described peer mentoring as a valuable alternative to the traditional concept of mentorship. Unlike traditional mentoring, peer mentoring matches mentors and mentees who are roughly equal in age, experience, and power to provide task and psychosocial support (Angelique et al., 2002).

Kram and Isabella (1985) have studied the differences between traditional mentoring and peer relationships in terms of the mentor functions served and the relationship outcomes. Although their study was conducted in a business rather than an educational setting, their findings point to several important differences. Specifically, in peer relationships career-related functions are limited to information sharing and career strategizing, whereas traditional mentoring enables a greater variety of these functions, namely sponsorship, coaching, exposure and visibility, protection, and challenging work assignments. However, there is greater similarity between the two in the psychosocial functions of the relationships. In peer relationships, psychosocial functions are characterized by confirmation, emotional support, personal feedback, and friendship. Traditional mentoring relationships are similar in that they offer acceptance, confirmation, counselling, role modelling, and friendship. Interestingly, although much research supports the use of mentor and peer mentor relationships to improve academic performance and decrease student attrition, few studies link peer mentoring functions with the type of peer best able to fulfil these functions. This literature review attempts to establish a taxonomy of the student peer mentor by seeking, from the research, a list of mentor characteristics most often associated with positive outcomes from the mentoring relationship for both mentor and mentee.

The following definition, based on Kram (1983), is used herein: peer mentoring is a helping relationship in which two individuals of similar age and/or experience come together, either informally or through formal mentoring schemes, in the pursuit of fulfilling some combination of functions that are career-related (e.g. information sharing, career strategizing) and psychosocial (e.g. confirmation, emotional support, personal feedback, friendship).

Aims of the research:

What does this article tell us about what a literature review can achieve?
When writing a literature review as an assignment on a set topic...

✓ The **main aim** is to know what work has been done previously in the topic area. The review summarises and brings together all of the key research findings in an easily-read, focused way.

✓ Identify research possibilities and tailor a possible research project

✓ Locate or develop a research methodology appropriate to a future project

✓ Justify a choice of area for further investigation.

These aims for a review may be for a real project you might undertake later in your studies (in your final year) or the assignment may be a ‘simulation’, i.e. you write the literature review but it is a stand-alone assessment for a topic you will not go on to investigate further.

Writing a literature review is **not just about collection**, it’s about showing you can “select, organize and classify findings into a coherent [account]” (Bell, 2005: 110). The written up review is **deliberately succinct** and gives the key research/knowledge/issues in the field. It is **not just descriptive** – sources need to be engaged with critically before they make the final cut. Finding the literature may be about fact-finding but the written up version rarely is as it aims for **academic critical objectivity**. It is not a good idea to leave out a key study/finding because it disagrees with a position or hypothesis you are arguing or to make it about ‘personal’ beliefs.

### 2. What is **in** a literature review assignment

In many ways, a literature review assignment is just like any other written assignment with a prescribed deadline and word count. However, many students find them daunting as they perceive they involve more work than an assignment on another aspect of their course. This is not necessarily the case; it is just a different sort of work that must be undertaken.

Adapted from Hart (1998: 15)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree/level:</th>
<th>Overall content is determined by what you’ve found when reviewing literature.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **BA, BSc, BEng** | Topic focused to answer a question or justify further research so...  
- Key (current) sources  
- Seminal (definitive) sources |
| **MA, MSc** | - Summarise field’s knowledge so far  
- Analyse body of work found within the topic, including theoretical underpinning of the topic/key issues  
- May analyse the **methodology** literature  
- Seminal work and new research that is highly relevant is foregrounded |
As shown above the main aim of a literature review is to find out what work has been done previously in the topic area. But what actually goes into a literature review? The list below gives you a general overview of what is ‘usual’ in a literature review, although each discipline and school has its own specific requirements and criteria for the content so make sure you read your module handbooks to find out exactly what is expected. If you are in any doubts, speak to your lecturer.

A written-up literature review might include content angled toward each of the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historical background</th>
<th>Justification of (reasons for) the a research project by showing the body of knowledge it would contribute to</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An overview of current research context</td>
<td>Identification &amp; analysis of key evidence, concepts and theories which underpin a given topic within a discipline.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current gaps in the field where new research could extend or complete missing aspects of what has been researched before.</td>
<td>Debate about key assumptions or findings that a discipline relies upon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Hart, 1998; Ridley, 2012)

Whatever the focal point of the argument is, the literature review is about presenting the outcomes from your analysis and close engagement with the literature!

### 3. Structuring literature reviews

Whilst there are basic principles of effective structuring such as...
- Introduction
- Conclusion
- References

...literature reviews often have headings and sub-headings to aid in organising the finished paper, and you may also be required to provide additional information in an appendix. You will normally find information on this in your module handbook. If they are not, then ask the lecturer who will be assessing the module.

Looking at published literature reviews (journal articles) within your discipline area can help, as this gives you ideas on how other specialists have handled their organisation. Ultimately, the structure of the assignment is determined by what you have found out (your findings), unless your course sets a predetermined structure for the review.
The following are possible considerations when deciding how to structure the paper. Are you working from any of the following approaches?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematically</th>
<th>Pros and cons</th>
<th>Chronologically</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical</td>
<td>‘Fors’ and ‘againsts’</td>
<td>Historical to present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodological</td>
<td>Strengths and weaknesses</td>
<td>Era by era</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Oliver (2012).

You may decide to organise your argument using a combination of all 3!

Unfortunately there is not a single answer, as ‘structure’ means both the organisation of your findings AND the argument you are making using those findings to best answer the question set or explore the topic under review.

Be prepared to be creative! Try organising your assignment one way, then experiment with another to see which reads ‘best’.

Once you have determined how you will organise your paper, you need to start thinking about individual ‘discussion points’ within a paragraph which can also follow a structure. This helps to make sure the draft reads as logical, authoritative and capable of offering critical insights about the literature, rather than it reading as little more than a jumble of your own thought processes when thinking about what you are reading!
Paragraph structure:

1. Lead-in/introductory topic-based opener
2. Explanation or outlining needed to understand what follows
3. The critical point to be made about your finding(s)
4. Evidence from the literature that supports the point you are making & any debates about it
5. Lead-out/conclusory sentence that links this individual point to the larger question/aim/hypothesis at hand & any link forward to the next point.

This means, when planning your draft you will be moving between thinking about:

- what the paper as a whole will contain, which discussion points, in what order and why

  to...

- thinking about what these individual discussion points will contain, what material from your review to include and why.

4. Moving from analytical notes to written work

Some students who read a broad range and large number of sources often find that they get disappointing marks for critical analysis and structure. This is because they do not engage effectively with the literature. Good critical writing including insights about the studies read and having a clear structure will not happen ‘by accident’. You need to do some planning and mapping of the ideas that emerge from the sources before starting to write up your review. In short, you must allocate time to engaging in the actual review of the studies (this was covered in another workshop) and then you need to map out how all of this can be assembled as a clear, academic paper.
When you are engaging in this, bear in mind the following:

- Keep the aims/questions/hypotheses of the assignment firmly in mind when beginning to assemble material. Remember, it is not a catalogue of every study ever done – you are aiming toward something set in the assessment brief or question.

- Be aware it is a ‘circular’ not a linear process. Sometimes, you may be planning the end of the paper when a ‘eureka’ moment makes you decide to change the first section to improve its content.

- Remember there are likely to be overlaps between the sub-topics within the topic you are reviewing. Can these be exploited as ‘links’ between different sections or paragraphs that contain discussion points?

- Create a line of reasoning and gain distance from the texts to allow you to think about ‘what to write’. You need to develop something to say and shape your argument into a linear, logical order. Taking an ‘aerial view’ of what you have researched and read; getting that distance will enable you to see which the strongest points to discuss are and to see the links between points. Your line of reasoning will be made up of individual points with each one written by you to both stand alone as an individual ‘brick’ in the argument you are constructing, and to flow from one and to the next.

Together we will generate as many ideas as we can for working with notes from reading. For example, we’ve already seen that using index cards to create summaries of your critical reading of each source can help find connections or themes – are there any other methods you can identify? Share your ideas with the group.

5. **Maintaining academic style**

   ✓ Avoid over personalisation unless a lecturer suggests they want a ‘personal take’, so use 3rd person sentences and pronouns.

   *Scrutiny of recent data reveals... vs I looked at some recent information...*

   ✓ You are criticising theories/evidence/studies not people.

   *Potential deficiencies of Smith’s study are... vs Smith is clearly not a reliable researcher...*
Your review is not journalism, make sure all of your observations have evidence to back them up and don’t be ‘chatty’.

This review’s findings would suggest… vs what I found was…

Use ‘cautious’ phrasing more than definitive statements

Potential issues within Prasan’s study are… vs This study is poor

Avoid overly-complex sentences: 7-15 words per sentence are enough.

Consider using a phrasebank during the editing and re-drafting phase of writing to help you to improve on your style. Morley’s Phrasebank: http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/

Editing and redrafting are ‘text’ level and deal with the subject you are writing about. Proofing and ‘polishing’ are at ‘sentence’ and ‘word’ level to make sure the paper is not full of poor phrasing and errors.

References


**Answers**

**Activity 1:** What does a review achieve?

A taxonomy of the characteristics of student peer mentors in higher education: findings from a literature review

Jenepher Lennox Terrion* and Dominique Leonard  
University of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Abstract

Peer mentoring in higher education is regarded as an effective intervention to ensure the success and retention of vulnerable students. Many universities and colleges have therefore implemented some form of mentoring program as part of their student support services. While considerable research supports the use of peer mentoring to improve academic performance and decrease student attrition, few studies link peer mentoring functions with the type of peer best suited to fulfil these functions. This literature review categorizes the abundant student peer mentor descriptors found in mentoring research. The result is a preliminary taxonomy that classifies ten peer mentor characteristics according to mentoring function served (career-related or psychosocial). The proposed taxonomy and the discussion developed in this article help shed light on the dynamics of successful student peer mentoring relationships in higher education. **Aim is to produce the taxonomy. The abstract summarises the use of mentoring, justifies why carried out research (gap in studies), what is in the lit review (descriptors of student peer mentor), the results, and the contribution this study makes to the field.**

University and college administrators have long sought to identify the support mechanisms necessary to improve the retention, academic success, and educational experience of their students. Peer mentoring, in which qualified students provide guidance and support to vulnerable students to enable them to navigate through their education (Kram, 1983), is regarded as an effective intervention to ensure these outcomes (Freedman, 1993; Johnson, 2002; Kram, 1983; McLean, 2004; Pagan & Edwards-Wilson, 2002; Topping, 1996). Given this potential, many universities and colleges have implemented some form of peer mentoring, peer helping, or tutoring program as part of their student support services (Jacobi, 1991; Johnson, 2002; Tinto, 1998). **Leaves us in no doubt as to the topic under review – identifies importance of peer mentoring schemes to retention and other strategies to HE institutions and provides lots of sources as evidence of this.**

Peer mentoring is based on the traditional mentoring model, in which an older, more experienced person serves one of two main functions: a task-related or Leonard career-related function (providing advice, support, and information related to task accomplishment, professional development, and career success); or a psychosocial function (providing emotional and psychological support) (Kram & Isabella, 1985). In her
review of the literature on mentoring, Jacobi (1991) supports this dual-function model of mentoring and reports that the studies she reviewed also tended to group functions in two similar categories, with some variation in the labels given to the functions. For example, the career-related function has also been referred to as the instrumental and vocational function, while the psychosocial function has been alternately described as the intrinsic function. Jacobi also notes that dissent exists about the nature of role modelling in mentoring: Some researchers, such as Kram (1983), place it under the psychosocial function, whereas others recognize it as a distinct function, thereby according it an entirely separate category. Establishes that the topic is not without debate – this is key – establish ‘doubt’ or debate – as a lit review’s job is to engage with these key debates – specifically the two (or possibly three, role modelling) functions of peer mentors. Also looks at the different labels the types of peer mentors are given.

The traditional form of mentoring consists of a hierarchical relationship in which the mentor is considerably older and more experienced than the mentee. However, Kram and Isabella (1985) have described peer mentoring as a valuable alternative to the traditional concept of mentorship. Unlike traditional mentoring, peer mentoring matches mentors and mentees who are roughly equal in age, experience, and power to provide task and psychosocial support (Angelique et al., 2002). Begins to establish some of key considerations within the field before setting up what this particular review focused upon. Explains the history of mentoring and what is how peer mentoring differs. Kram and Isabella (1985) have studied the differences between traditional mentoring and peer relationships in terms of the mentor functions served and the relationship outcomes. Although their study was conducted in a business rather than an educational setting, their findings point to several important differences. Specifically, in peer relationships career-related functions are limited to information sharing and career strategizing, whereas traditional mentoring enables a greater variety of these functions, namely sponsorship, coaching, exposure and visibility, protection, and challenging work assignments. However, there is greater similarity between the two in the psychosocial functions of the relationships. In peer relationships, psychosocial functions are characterized by confirmation, emotional support, personal feedback, and friendship. Traditional mentoring relationships are similar in that they offer acceptance, confirmation, counselling, role modelling, and friendship. Interestingly, although much research supports the use of mentor and peer mentor relationships to improve academic performance and decrease student attrition, few studies link peer mentoring functions with the type of peer best able to fulfil these functions. Establishes some of key considerations within the field (discussion of differences and similarities between trad mentoring and peer mentoring) before setting up what this particular review focused upon, i.e. type of peer best able to provide support. This literature review attempts to establish a taxonomy of the student peer mentor by seeking, from the research, a list of mentor characteristics most often associated with positive outcomes from the mentoring relationship for both mentor and mentee. Makes its mission clear – it is examining current studies in order to classify types of student peer-mentoring by identifying key features of what a mentor is when he/she works effectively. This is an important example of a literature review being more than a ‘furniture catalogue’: it is not just going to list everything the researchers read about peer-mentoring. It is deliberately going to use these to say something new about what a good student peer-mentor ‘looks like’.

The following definition, based on Kram (1983), is used herein: peer mentoring is a helping relationship in which two individuals of similar age and/or experience come together, either informally or through formal mentoring schemes, in the pursuit of fulfilling some combination of functions that are career-related (e.g. information sharing, career strategizing) and psychosocial (e.g. confirmation, emotional support, personal feedback, friendship). Before beginning in detail, offers an all-important definition so that the reader can hold this in mind while reading their take on the literature, rather than perhaps relying on a different interpretation of what a key concept, peer-mentoring, is.
Aims of the research:

‘To establish a taxonomy of the student peer mentor by seeking, from the research, a list of mentor characteristics most often associated with positive outcomes from the mentoring relationship for both mentor and mentee.’ Briefly described in abstract and then more fully in penultimate paragraph.

**TALKING POINT**

- Using the notes function of Endnote
- Using MS Office OneNote to create a notebook
- Using sticky notes
- Creating a database of findings in access or excel
- Code up handwritten or typed notes using a personalised colour code or alpha-numeric code
- Use the back of a roll of wallpaper to brainstorm and link findings in your notes
- Use mind-mapping or concept mapping, either by hand or using university software