

UNIT 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 What is a literature review?

Before we can create new knowledge, we must first know the current state of knowledge about our research subject. The literature review will provide an overview or summary of prior reliable knowledge or literature relevant to the proposed study. In other words, think of the literature review as work done by other people that will help you gain a clear picture of the current knowledge about your research topic or provide the base of knowledge on what is known about the problem to be studied. Hence, literature review is not where you introduce your original thoughts and ideas; it simply sets the stage where you can do that later on. N: B Whatever your research question is, chances are someone has already answered it. Therefore, you are not reinventing the “wheel”; instead, you are simply researching existing information about your research question so that later on, you can look at it from a different angle, question it, debate it and add your own information. Effective researchers will use the knowledge and insights of others and draw on elements of prior research.

The literature review section may be separate or incorporated into other sections (problem, methods, or conceptual framework). Noteworthy is that you should confine your review to *only scientific* and not popular literature. Examples of popular literature include newspapers, news magazines, or industry or popular publications.

Hence, you should develop your scientific literature through a *peer review process* of the following:

- Professional *journals*. Click this link to view existing UNZA Journal platforms.
[*Journal platforms.xlsx*](#)
- *Formal research reports*.
- *University-affiliated bulletins*.
- *Reports and monographs*.
- *Publications* by research foundations and international organizations.

N: B Scientific literature does not ensure that it is infallible or even correct – instead, it has been through independent checks of accuracy and correctness.

3.2 Purpose of the Literature Review

If the literature review is flawed, the readers may consider the remainder of the dissertation/research report inadequate because “a researcher cannot perform significant research without first understanding the literature in the field s/he is investigating.” Boote and Beile, 2005 highlight the primary literature review purposes. They include:

- **It brings clarity and focus to your research problem.** Most times, you begin with an idea of what you want to investigate, and then you move on to search the literature. Reading the different publications on that topic will help you link your research problem to the body of existing knowledge in the area. When developing your research problem, you must identify something that still needs to be done or where there are still controversies, which we refer to as a research gap. Therefore, literature review helps to prevent duplication of what has already been done by researchers, identify new areas where research is needed and shape your research problem. The literature review may reveal conceptual insights into the research problem and suggest possible hypotheses for your study.
- **Improving your methodology:** Writing a literature review also helps improve your methodology. This exercise will teach you the sources of data, procedures, approaches or methods used by others that will work for you. So, by reading all those papers, one learns about the methods other researchers have used to answer similar questions. Through this comparison

and assessment, you would base your judgement on which approach worked better and which will be most effective for your research.

- **Broaden your knowledge base in your research area:** The most apparent purpose of a literature review is to broaden your research base in your research interest area. Reading all those papers ensures you read widely about the subject area you intend to research. This is important because you want to know what others have found regarding your research questions. Also, you learn what theories other researchers have put forward, and what gaps exist in the relevant body of knowledge. Of course, this goes back to helping you shape your research question.
- **Contextualize your findings:** Another purpose of the literature review is to contextualize your findings. We usually do this when we write our discussion, where the literature review helps you identify how your results compare with the existing body of knowledge. In your discussion section, you usually have to compare your answers to your research question to what others have found. You should state how different your findings are from others and explain the reasons for those differences. Finally, you highlight your contributions to the existing body of knowledge from your findings.



KEY POINTS TO NOTE

In summary, a literature review serves several important functions:

- Ensures that you are not "reinventing the wheel".
- Gives credits to those who have laid the groundwork for your research.
- Demonstrates your knowledge of the research problem and helps you argue why your topic is essential.
- Shows your ability to evaluate relevant literature information to identify gaps or weaknesses critically.
- Provides new theoretical insights for your research.
- Convinces your reader that your proposed research will significantly contribute to the literature (i.e., resolving an important theoretical issue or filling a major gap in the literature).

3.3 Common problems in literature reviews

Writing a literature review is a challenging task. Some of you will agree with me. Some common problems people encounter when writing a literature review include the following:

- Writing a literature review that needs more organisation and structure.
- Sometimes the writer tends to be repetitive.
- Some people fail to cite influential papers. N:B you can identify influential papers by looking at how many times other researchers or authors have cited a paper.
- Failure to keep up with the recent developments in your specific research area of interest. Therefore, you must always include recent papers published in that area.
- Lastly, some people fail to evaluate the cited papers critically. In the following sections, we will learn more about critical evaluation.

3.4 How to search the literature

Where do you start when searching the literature? The first thing you need to do is identify your topic. My pro tip for you is to take your research topic and think of it as a research question. Remember, we said that you should know what you want to investigate before searching for your literature. Once you have formulated your research question, you then identify the key concepts in the research question.

For instance, if our research topic is ‘**Determinants of smallholder farmers’ participation in Zambian dairy sector’s interlocked contractual arrangements**’, our literature review question might be: *What do we know about the determinants of smallholder farmer’s participation in the Zambian dairy sector interlocked contractual arrangements?* A keynote to consider is that we might restrict our search to sub-Saharan Africa.

To effectively conduct your search, you can use a few different angles to look at your research. You can look for: *answers to your research question, trends or patterns, contradictions or debates or research gaps*. But remember that no matter what or how you look for it, the key is to do SMART research.

How does one do SMART research in this context? When you find an article, you should first read the abstract or introduction because it will tell you if what is in the article is helpful for you. If the answer is yes, then read the conclusion because the conclusion and the introduction together will give you the full scope of what exactly is in the article.

3.4.1 Identifying key search terms

Once you have your research topic/question, identify keywords and phrases defining the topic or question. These may include words relevant to the problem, objectives, conceptual framework and methods or procedures. Also, review prior research that used analytical techniques or specific issues you intend to study; you may include these techniques in the keywords.

For our particular question, “*Determinants of smallholder farmers’ participation in Zambian dairy sector’s interlocked contractual arrangements*”, the key concepts would be contract agriculture, dairy farmer’s market participation, smallholder market linkages and rural development strategy, double hurdle model etc.

3.4.2 Where to search

After identifying the key search terms, the next step is to do the actual literature search. Google Scholar is one of the best search engines researchers’ use. You should paste the research question/search terms into the search box to give you a good pool of potentially relevant articles you can read.

For instance, we could be interested in articles on ‘Food security in Zambia’. A keynote to pay attention to is the citation feature listed at the bottom of each listing (Figure 3.1). So, note how the bottom two articles have only been cited 24 and 26 times, whilst the 2nd article has been cited 161 times, which tells you that the latter is a strong article that would make for a good source for your research.

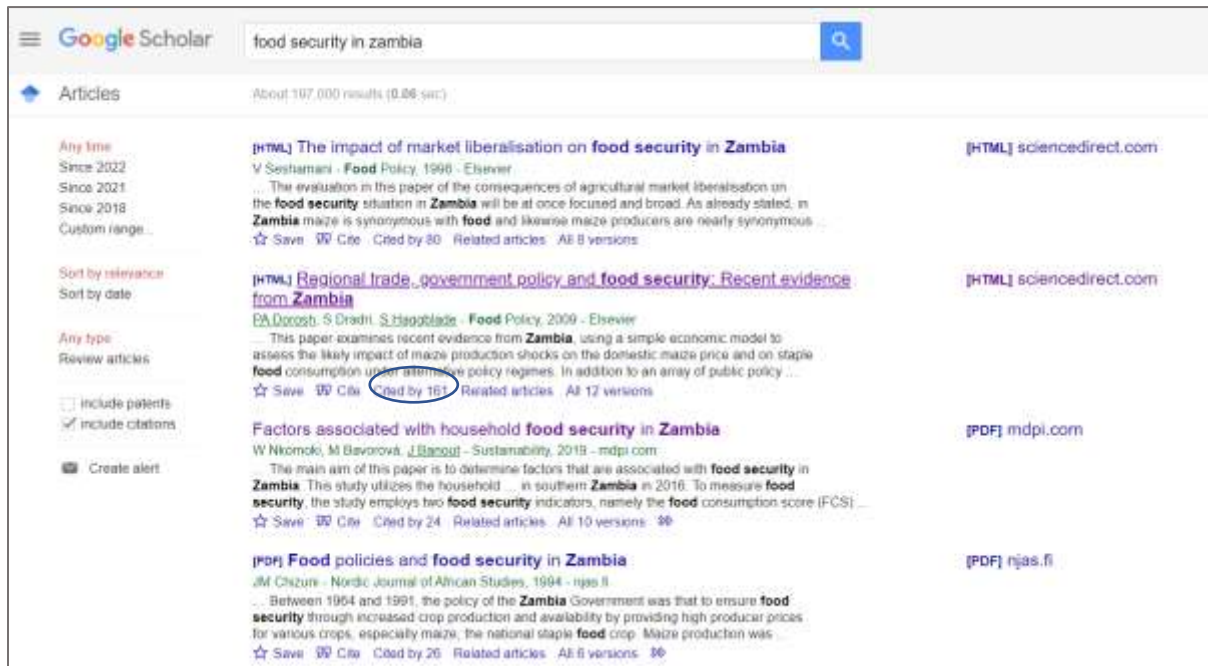


Figure 3.1: Example of a Google Scholar search

The next research strategy would be “networking”, where you will use the reference list from other articles to find more sources for your research. For example, you could find 3-5 good articles; use their reference list to find like-minded sources.

Another tip to consider when searching for literature is using the date restriction and relevance criteria. Date restriction will enable you to ensure you are using the most up-to-date articles. Relevance comes in by deciding what is relevant, as you will have many articles coming up when you search. Some will not be relevant, so you have to read through the abstract, as mentioned earlier and see whether the article(s) is appropriate.

3.4.3 How does one keep track of what they read?

Using the words of Eric Hofstee, “Academic reading is not done to pleasantly pass the hours on a Sunday afternoon. It is goal-orientated, done to satisfy a predefined need. You want something from the secondary literature, and you should name what that is before you start reading.”

One can keep track of what they read by taking down notes, saving the word or pdf documents of the abstracts and finally compiling a literature table or matrix.

- **The literature table/matrix:** this is a table that summarises the main papers you read and will help you put all your thoughts in one place (Klopper et al., 2007). (See Table 3.1)
- **Synthesis matrix:** this is a table where you organize information based on the key themes identified while reading your literature (See table 3.2).

Table 3.1: Literature matrix/table

| Reference | Aim | Sample | Methods | Findings | Conclusion | Evaluation <i>(Your final thoughts about the article)</i> |
|-----------|-----|--------|---------|----------|------------|--|
| Source 1 | | | | | | |
| Source 2 | | | | | | |
| Source 3 | | | | | | |
| Source 4 | | | | | | |

Table 3.2: Synthesis matrix

| Themes | Source 1 | Source 2 | Source 3 | Source 4 | Source 5 | Source 6 |
|---------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Theme 1 | | | | | | |
| Theme 2 | | | | | | |
| Theme 3 | | | | | | |
| Theme 4 | | | | | | |



Class Activity 3.1: Literature matrix/table

Read the downloaded articles for your research topic and summarise the key information using the Literature matrix/table and synthesis matrix highlighted in Tables 3.1 and 3.2. Which one do you consider more useful when conducting a literature review for your future research and why?

3.5 Critically appraising the literature

So earlier, we indicated that one of the common problems people encounter when writing a literature review is failing to appraise the literature critically. To help you critically appraise the literature, we will list the sections of a journal paper and what key features or facts you must look out for.

3.5.1 Gathering facts

Abstract: this will give you a high-level overview of the paper. You will need to note potential problems and relevant information.

Introduction: this will help you identify the questions the author is addressing, and it tells you about the goal of the authors and their rationale for conducting their study. What is the motive for conducting the research? Also, is there a significant gap they are trying to bridge through their research? In other

words, the introduction will give you an idea of whether what the authors were trying to do was important.

Methodology: This section is vital in helping you identify potential problems because the integrity of the authors' findings will depend on how they conducted their study. So, you will have to look at whether their study design matches the objectives and research question. Possible weakness: how did they identify their participants? What were their sampling criteria? If there is any missing data, how much was missing, and how did they account for that?

How did they collect and analyse their data? What would the potential impact of any of the problems identified be? The answer to this question will help you have a voice in the write-up as you will use your judgements to assess what influenced their findings.

Results: In this section, you check what key findings are being reported by the authors and do they seem reasonable. Are the figures and tables valid? That is, is the information disseminated comprehensible?

Discussion: In this section, you check how the authors interpreted their results. How did they discuss the concerns you identified in the methods section, and how do their results compare with existing studies? What could be the possible reason for those differences?

Conclusion: Finally, you move on to the conclusions section. In this section, you will have to assess the study's implications. The authors will state why they think their findings matter and do you agree with that or do you not.

3.6 Literature review structure

This section will teach us how to structure your literature review write-up.

3.6.1 Types of Literature reviews

There are two forms of literature review: systematic and non-systematic.

- i. *Systematic review* means a comprehensive review of all the literature that is out there about the topic. This type of review excludes the possibility of selection bias as one has to include all the article(s).
- ii. In the *non-systematic review*, the author selects particular papers they want to include to give their perspective about their topic, so there is some bias in which articles you choose to include.

The literature review can be written as a section in your dissertation, research report, research proposal chapter, or section of your manuscript, which will be part of the background or introduction section. You can write your proposal for academic purposes, ethical reviews or funding and the manuscript for publication.

3.6.2 Literature review generic structure

Like any part of a research proposal or report, the literature review section needs organization. It should not be a series of unconnected summaries of studies but rather a *synthesis of previous related literature*.

- Develop an outline of the literature review before you start to write.
- Use subheadings to organize the literature review and direct the reader's attention. These are usually subject-matter headings, which logically group studies with a similar focus.
- The literature review should summarize but not repeat information. Seek to analyze, compare and contrast the literature reviewed.
- Direct quotations can be helpful but use them sparingly. Refrain from reproducing graphs or tables.

- Be sure to include the economic foundation's literature related to your research. An overview of conceptual thinking, analytical procedures, and the progression of research can put your work in perspective.
- Knowing when to summarize the published information and when to refer to it can be challenging; this will primarily depend on the background of your audience.
- *Do not reference a source of an idea without actually having read it.* (Another person's summary and interpretation may differ from your own).

The generic structure of the literature review is as follows:

An introduction: this should provide the reader with the scale and layout of your review as it serves as a map.

The body of the review: this depends on how you have organized your key points. Literature reviews should be evaluative and not merely descriptive. For example, possible reasons for similarities or differences between studies are considered rather than a mere identification of them.

The conclusion of the review: needs to sum up the main findings of your literature review. Your findings can relate to your proposed study's aims and the gaps you have identified. Thus you will provide the reader with a coherent background to the current research.

3.6.3 Methods of structuring your literature review

The most common method is the *funnel method*, where you start with a broad introduction and then narrow down to more details about work related to your topic. After that, you concentrate on relevant aspects of your work and finally end with what you propose to do, which will address the gap you have identified.



FUNNEL METHOD

Start with a broad introduction.

Focus down into more detail about work related to your topic.

Concentrate on aspects relevant to your work.

Ending with what you propose to do (gaps identified).

The body of your literature review can also be structured *chronologically*, where you talk about timelines. For instance, supposing your topic focuses on food security policies in Zambia. You could start with the chronological evolution of the policies, i.e. the changes that have happened up until this point over the years.

You could also structure it by *theme*, where each paragraph talks about each one of those key concepts that we discussed earlier.

We are now going to do an activity on structuring by theme.



Class Activity 3.2: Structuring by theme using a mind map

Read the following journal article:

Kiwanuka, R.N.L & Machethe, C., (2016). Determinants of smallholder farmers' participation in Zambian dairy sector's interlocked contractual arrangements. *Journal of Sustainable Development*; Vol. 9, (2).

Structure the literature review by theme and use a mind map to answer the following question. **What factors affect smallholder farmers' participation in the Zambian dairy sector's interlocked contractual arrangements?** The output should be a conceptual framework or mind map and a narrative (theory) of at most two pages of the factors affecting smallholder farmers' participation in the Zambian dairy sector's interlocked contractual arrangements. (N:B you may want to refer to Unit 2.5.2: *What is a theory?*)

3.6.4 Characteristics of a good literature review

Mondo (2021) summarizes the characteristics of a good literature review. It should do three things:

1. Include a short introduction that defines or identifies the general topic, issue, or area of concern, thus providing an appropriate context for reviewing the literature (this is called establishing a territory).
2. Synthesize other research on the topic, explaining what is known about it.
3. Conclude by stating what is missing, what is controversial, what is not yet known, or what needs to be resolved in the discussion. This will provide the transition later to your own study and your research questions (this is called establishing a niche).

In addition, a good literature review will:

- Be driven by and related directly to the thesis or research question you are developing;
- Include only sources related to your topic, and discuss only relevant points from those sources;
- Identify areas of controversy or discrepancy, if those are relevant to your study;
- Group sources according to common denominators such as conclusions of authors, findings, etc;
- Summarize individual studies or articles with as much or as little detail as each merits according to its comparative importance in the literature, remembering that space (length) denotes significance;
- It must strike a balance between sources supporting and opposing a particular aspect or argument;

- It should be wide enough to cover or provide enough information required on the subject;
- It must be narrow enough to eliminate irrelevant information from your research;
- It must be conducted from reliable sources- students must give journals and books the first priority when doing a literature review. In the event you they are using articles written by other researchers, the articles must be peer-reviewed;
- The writer must follow the stipulated formatting style;
- The sources must be relevant and authoritative;
- It should not necessarily be organized logically, organizing a literature based on the weight of points presented gives it more weight;
- It must clearly address the research question and the theoretical framework;
- It must identify studies and models that support your topic;
- It should define key term, terminology and definitions. It should also state the meaning of acronyms;
- It must lay a strong foundation for your research topic;
- Evaluate the source for relevance and quality noting that a long list of sources does not necessarily translate to high quality literature review; and
- Confirm the availability of duplicated researches.

3.6.5 Referencing

Referencing involves documentation of the literature sources in the proposal/research project and includes all sources used to explain, define or document the problem. Referencing previous literature occurs throughout the research proposal and report but is used most in the literature review section or chapter.

We reference other literature to:

- Provide supporting (or contrary) evidence for the views we write about
- Assign credit for an idea, concept or result
- Add information and details on matters discussed.

Giving credit for the thoughts, ideas, efforts and contributions of others is an important *ethical issue*. *Plagiarism* is the failure to give credit for an idea or research result to its originator. Presenting someone else's words or ideas as your own is wrong and can hurt your professional standing. By correctly referencing and giving credit for others' work, you show that you are aware of the state of knowledge in your subject and are familiar with the work of leaders in the field.

The style used in referencing may vary with the type of publication and your preference. The most commonly used is *parenthetical referencing*, which provides the author's last name, year of publication, and sometimes the page number. e.g. (Ethridge, 2004). The cited references appear in the Reference section at the end of the report/paper. You can use footnotes (notes at the bottom of the page) or Endnotes (similar notes placed at the end of the paper) if allowed.

N:B The Department of Agricultural Economics and Extension uses the Harvard referencing style. *Click here to view how to reference and cite using the Harvard referencing style.*
[Journal platforms.xlsx](#)

Another possible style is to use a number in parentheses e.g. (4), with a numbered References list at the end of the paper. Many different styles are used for the References section. It is best to refer to the style used by the agency or publication to which you will submit the paper. Finally, the referencing of internet sources still needs to be fully resolved. Generally, include the full web address and website access date. N:B To get more insights on citing and referencing your work, read Unit 3.2 notes on Research proposal writing guidelines.



Assignment 2 (Due date 11th April, 2023)

Using the feedback you received on Assignment 1, write the following sections of the first two chapters of your research proposal. Chapter 1 the background, problem statement, aim and specific objectives, research question/hypotheses, rationale and Chapter 2 literature review which should be in line with the specific objectives you set yourself.

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