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REVIEW
State of Reviews

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The traditional literature review

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INTRODUCTION

There was a time not that long ago, in a much "simpler" universe, when a literature review was just that—a review of the literature. Today the process of getting started with any scholarly investigation emerges much like it has always been. A scholar decides to focus on a particular topic or problem, often inspired by a concern encountered in their own scope of interest and sets about to find out what other scholars have already addressed in relation to this subject. This early process is largely a serendipitous journey into sources that are readily available and serves the main purpose of clarifying the nature of the problem to be investigated and narrowing the focus so that the research to be undertaken is practical and "doable."

After this initial survey process, scholars follow the general practice of reviewing "the" literature—traditionally thought to be based on discovery of just about anything and everything that has ever been published to date that is related to the issue, in part to justify the project that is now being conducted. Essentially, scholars have always aimed to address the questions: "What is already known about this topic?" and "What will my research contribute to the field that is not already there?" Crafting adequate responses to these questions has now become a research project in its own right, and must precede, to some degree of detail, embarking on any scholarly enterprise.

With the massive explosion of the information universe, it became clear that in many instances, the undertaking of a review of almost anything and everything published on a topic is likely to be impossible. In response to this challenge, various types of reviews have been defined, and standards have been established to assure that these reviews meet quality expectations that are very similar to the standards and procedures that have been established for the conduct of the research method used for investigation. Future *Nurse Author & Editor* articles will provide an overview of the most commonly used types of reviews that are being used in nursing, along with explanations of the rationale for conducting each of the review types.

THE TRADITIONAL LITERATURE REVIEW

The general idea of the "literature review" is necessary and relevant, despite the fact that such a review can never be expected to be inclusive of all existing literature on any topic. In fact, starting very early, even in elementary school, students are expected to learn the importance of searching the literature to find out what is known about a subject of interest. As young people grow and learn how to draw on the existing literature, their sophistication in reading and interpreting that literature matures. They acquire skills to synthesize the information they find, and use this information to justify conclusions about a known topic that are well-founded. Reviewing existing literature is a fundamental necessity for both undergraduate and graduate students as they advance their knowledge and understanding of the information needed to enter any career path. The literature review remains an essential element for any academic undertaking.

PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

The standards and expectations for a general literature review remain largely in the realm of general, often implied or assumed expectations that are part of the culture of any discipline. As such, the idea of a "literature review" remains flexible, serving a variety of purposes depending on what the project requires. The fact that the general literature review can be highly subjective is both an asset and a liability: it gives scholars an opportunity to be creative and offer novel insights into what is already published, but it also gives cover for inadequacies and even errors committed in the review process.

Assumed or implied expectations abound in relation to expectations for literature reviews. There are some journals in any field, for example, that carry a certain degree of respect or esteem in the discipline, and students are guided in the direction of knowing the literature published in the most prestigious of these journals. Well-known authors acquire a certain standing, such that any review that does not account for the publications of those esteemed authors

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is deemed inadequate, and lesser known authors, especially scholars of color, tend to be discounted.[1] Professors place their own expectations for evaluation of student papers that define those characteristics that they most value, such as a time frame in which sources cited must occur, or guidelines for specific content students are expected to cover in reviewing the literature.[2]

CONDUCTING A LITERATURE REVIEW

Even with these caveats, it is possible to discern general standards of quality and expectations for general literature reviews. The standards offered here are intended to prompt thoughtful consideration of expectations for literature reviews conducted by all undergraduate and graduate students, including reviews that are published in the PhD dissertation or the DNP project. These guidelines are designed to mitigate the negative aspects of subjectivity, and to establish standards for transparency in the review.

- Establish and describe the procedures used in selecting the literature included in the review. The flexibility of the general literature is one of its strengths, in that scholars are not obligated to follow rigid procedures for conducting the review. Gone are the days when any literature review can be all inclusive, requiring authors to state the rationale used for selecting the sources reviews. The justification for the selection of literature can draw on precedent, the nature of the problem being explored, and the purposes of the review. For example, there needs to be a rationale for using certain key terms in the process of discovering relevant sources, and not others.
- Establish the time frame that the review covers. The time frame of the review is highly significant, in that the "extant" knowledge on any topic may be relatively stable, or it may have shifted dramatically over the years. Each review needs to have an informed justification for any time period that is established for the review. For example, for a project that aims to explore factors that contribute to morbidity and mortality of Black women in childbirth, it is clear that recent literature on this topic must be included. However, how recent is recent? Is it reasonable to limit the review to the past 5 years, and what is the rationale for doing so? Are there reasons to include historically significant literature? What constitutes "historically significant" in this context?
- Define the elements of each source that was examined in conducting the review. Reviewing the literature implies that you have taken into account the entirety of each source used, but for some purposes you will want to be particularly attentive to some aspects of the literature over others. In some cases, the key element that you might report is the conclusions drawn in each source reviewed. For other purposes, your focus might be on the methods that were used in the sources reviewed. If your purpose requires taking note of the theoretical dimensions in the literature reviewed, note this emphasis, and describe what you were examining to determine this relatively abstract dimension.

CONSIDERATIONS

Once you determine the need to conduct a traditional literature review and have a sense of the enormity of the task, think about who needs to be involved. If you think you can do this by yourself, go for it! But if your review would benefit from having other people involved, then consider who will those persons be and what expertise is needed. As is the case when you embark on a team project, think about the time frame you have for the project and if other people on the team can work within that time frame.

Consider the realistic scope of the review you are undertaking. If you know that there is a wealth of articles related to your topic, you will need to limit the scope of the review in some ways and specify the rationale for limiting the scope. For example, if you limit the review to articles published in the past 5 years only, why this particular time frame? Will this limitation leave out important historical information? If you are looking for trends or changes over time, a limitation on time of publication will not reveal trends, so you will need to go much further back to detect trends over time. If this is the case, you can be more specific about the population included in the literature you are searching or specify a specific nursing focus, such as self-care dimensions, related to the topic you are interested in reviewing.

Set up a plan to manage the articles you will include, so that you have all of the bibliographic information you need organized in a systematic manner. A reference management system such as Paperpile, Endnote, or Zotero is essential, and gives you the capacity to detect duplicate publications that will need to be assessed for plagiarism or other misconduct issues that you might encounter. You can use these systems to keep notes about each article you review, based on any rubric you might have developed for the information you want to gather.

If you are giving students an assignment to conduct their own literature review—elementary, middle or high school kids, or even undergraduate students—be very specific about the scope of the task you are asking them to complete. You can limit the assignment for the review to a specific number of articles to include, or the time frame for the articles they select for the review. In addition, for beginners, make your expectations for their reviews clear, such as the specific features they need to include in the review along with other limits, as noted above.

CONCLUSION

A traditional literature review conducted with careful parameters that define the purpose and the scope of the review, remains an important undertaking in any scholarly endeavor. It is also an important learning activity for students, helping them to develop foundational skills in searching and analyzing existing literature. With the explosion of scholarly publications over the past several decades, it no longer serves the purpose of discovering broadly

"what is known." A traditional literature review does provide the information a scholar needs to justify their ongoing investigations, particularly what is required in conducting other types of reviews that have emerged that reveal specific understandings related to past literature.

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