

3 Quick Tips on How Researchers Can Handle Lack of Literature in Original Research

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Many a times, I have heard fellow researchers saying that they were unable to find any literature relevant to their research topic. Interestingly, does that mean they are doing something so novel that nobody has thought about, attempted, and consequently never reported. Let me give an example. Let's say a group of researchers are planning a project on evaluating the combined effectiveness of cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) and art therapy on children suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The researcher conducts an extensive search through the literature and finds only a handful articles reporting the effectiveness of CBT and art therapy. Eureka, they feel to have identified a gap! But hey, there's hardly anything written about it! Now that's a problem. There is not much to read or refer to! What will go in the literature chapter? Read ahead to find out how to deal with such situations!

Is Lack of Literature Real?

It is rather very unusual for a research problem to be absolutely unrelated to existing literature. In a normal setting, every research buds and grows from the edge of an

existing sphere of knowledge. Yet, if, by some means, you come up with an idea that is absolutely novel and original and you have very limited literature available on your topic, how do you proceed? What does it mean when you cannot find any literature that is relevant to your research? Well, there could be three reasons for this.

1. The topic is just not very interesting.
2. The topic is too narrow and highly specific, and investigating it is not that important.
3. The data/results are sensitive and therefore are hidden or kept confidential
4. The outcomes of this research were negative and consequently not published
5. Your search strategies were not robust enough

There is hardly anything one can do in the first four cases. The fifth case could definitely be given a second thought. Of course there has to be something in print or online.

Although it may not be directly on the exact same topic, there has to be something related. The answer to the “not enough literature” problem is always and most certainly, what else is pertinent.

Let's think of some of the other literatures that might be relevant to our supposed research problem – “Evaluating the combined effectiveness of CBT and art therapy on children suffering from PTSD”. There's probably research about the effectiveness of CBT and art therapies on children for a different disorder, different therapies used to treat PTSD, evaluation techniques for children suffering from PTSD, etc. You could ramp up your search protocols to capture all relevant literature specific to your research topic.

- Extend your search options by using [the right keywords](#)
- Use [Boolean operators](#) to broaden your search results

Researchers have to think more broadly about what they might need and could possibly use. Another way is to map the possible areas that are linked to the research question.

What If I Still Don't Have Enough Literature?

If all these strategies prove futile, assume for a while that there is no prior literature and continue with your research. However, when you are working in the lab, experimenting and investigating, keep searching for relevant articles.

- 1. Set up alerts for new articles for key topics crucial to your research topic.**

Several multidisciplinary databases such as Web of Science Core Collection and Scopus provide a feature to set up the following types of email alerts:

Topic email alerts: They help in finding the latest research on your topic of interest (based on the keywords that you've used).

Author alerts: They assist in identifying latest research published by a specific author(s).

2. **Subscribe for [table of content \(TOC\) alerts](#) of popular journals in your field.**

The most reliable and easiest way to get alerts for the most recently published tables of contents is to visit to the journal homepage. You could also [use services available](#) for selecting journals and setting up alerts. Most journals provide alerts in either RSS or e-mail format.

How do you make up for limited evidence?

1. Go into details of what is available

Having a limited number of resources can be an advantage as well! You could consider discussing relevant papers in greater detail. This is almost impossible when there are thousands of articles to screen from and you need to be much more selective).

2. Look at who has cited these articles

For the few relevant papers, find out who else has cited these articles. You may or may not be able to find pertinent or related information but you might find newer relevant articles. These articles could be the ones that you possibly missed finding using a keyword search. You could also follow what the authors of these papers have published to gain more insights.

3. Relate your work to the big picture

Is there a way you could connect your work to a broader research problem? Does it contribute to something greater? Suggest how the findings may be important for theory, practice, policy making, and subsequent research to increase its adoption.

Take home Message

A manuscript is never judged based on the number of references. References must be used to reflect the state of the field as it is! Even if there are fewer references, it does not matter. Researchers just need to ensure that they are relevant and important to develop a context and validate your findings. If you do not find many articles related to your topic, this in itself is a meaningful reflection about the status of research about the research problem under consideration. This lack of pre-existing literature gives you a chance to justify as to why your research question is important. Additionally, it's another reason for other academics to show interest in your work. Furthermore, if much has not been done, it indeed means your research is original.

Let us know if this article helped you overcome challenges related to limited literature in the comments section below! You can also visit our [Q&A forum](#) for frequently asked questions related to different aspects of research writing and publishing answered by our team that comprises subject-matter experts, eminent researchers, and publication experts.

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