

Description

The Purpose of a Literature Review

The key to any research study is the research question itself. A poorly written question that is too broad will generate questionable hypotheses, and if your supervisor fails to catch it in time, even more questionable results. Developing the right question requires a rock solid [literature review](#) that establishes your expertise as having been so immersed in the topic that you can rightfully vouch for the need for this research question to be asked.

That all sounds great on paper, but as the volume of academic research being published continues to rise year-on-year, the amount of searching that needs to be accomplished effectively to establish your expertise also increases. This, in turn, raises the question as to how much is enough?

Most supervisors will tell you that quality is measured in terms of relevance to your topic, and that your choice should always be [quality over quantity](#). However, that guidance, valuable though it may be, still leaves you with the question as to how much relevant material is enough?

Chasing a Moving Target

Most researchers struggling to survive in the middle of a [literature review](#) tend to worry more about the currency of their data more than the quantity of it. They become paranoid at the prospect of missing the latest paper or opinion piece that an examiner will spring on them at their oral defenses and destroy their academic careers in one fell swoop.

That's a valid, albeit a little emotional, concern and can be easily managed through a well-planned selection of RSS feeds and journal alerts based on appropriate keywords. What should take more thought and careful planning is developing the depth and breadth of your review—how wide, how deep (as in detailed), and how far back should you be looking?

The Importance of Structure

Many of the variables are going to be topic specific, but it will fall to you, your supervisor, and the help of an academic librarian who, hopefully, has some knowledge of your field, to establish those limits. It helps to think in terms of the manageable library of data that you are carefully building, as opposed to the vast ocean of data in which it will probably feel like you're drowning. There are some simple rules that can be applied:

- In academia, the size of the study is expected to correlate with the available resources. If you are a Ph.D. candidate pursuing a solo study, you are not expected to deliver the workload of an entire team of researchers.
- The breadth and depth of your [literature review](#) are connected. If you choose a relatively new area that has a limited history, you will be expected to “deep dive” in what has been published. If you choose to challenge or expand upon a well-established theory, you'll have to go back to the

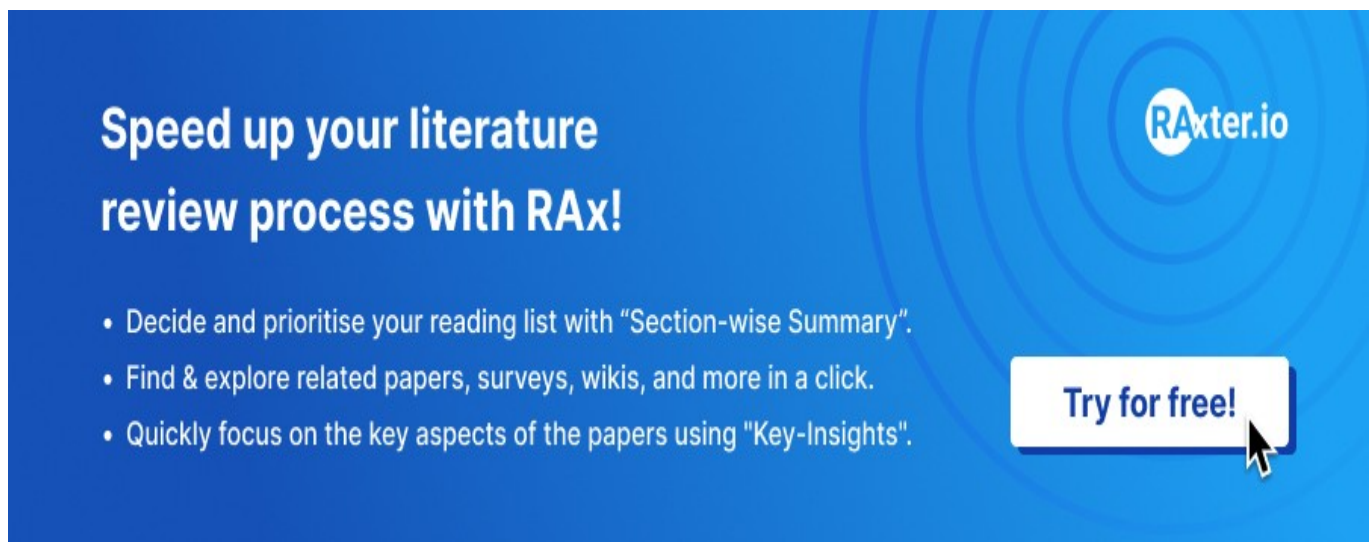
point of origin and possibly even further.

- Every theory or question has opposing arguments—each of those opposing positions will need to be clearly delineated.
- The chronology of your review will lead up to the justification for your research question. There shouldn't be any gaps or leaps in that chronology.

Sink or Swim on Search

The quality of your review will sink or swim on the efficacy with which you select your [search keywords](#). Too many and you'll be buried under results for months. Too few and you'll run the risk of missing a classic paper, a relevant theory, or the latest groundbreaking paper on the topic.

It's never a good idea to build the list quickly or on your own. Look at other [dissertations](#) for their keywords, and reach out to colleagues, departmental faculty, your supervisor, and several librarians (even if they work at other institutions). Your level of confidence in your search strings will contribute significantly to the gut reaction you will feel that you have "enough."



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Date Created

2016/03/18

Author

daveishan