Strategies for Planning a Dissertation Literature Review

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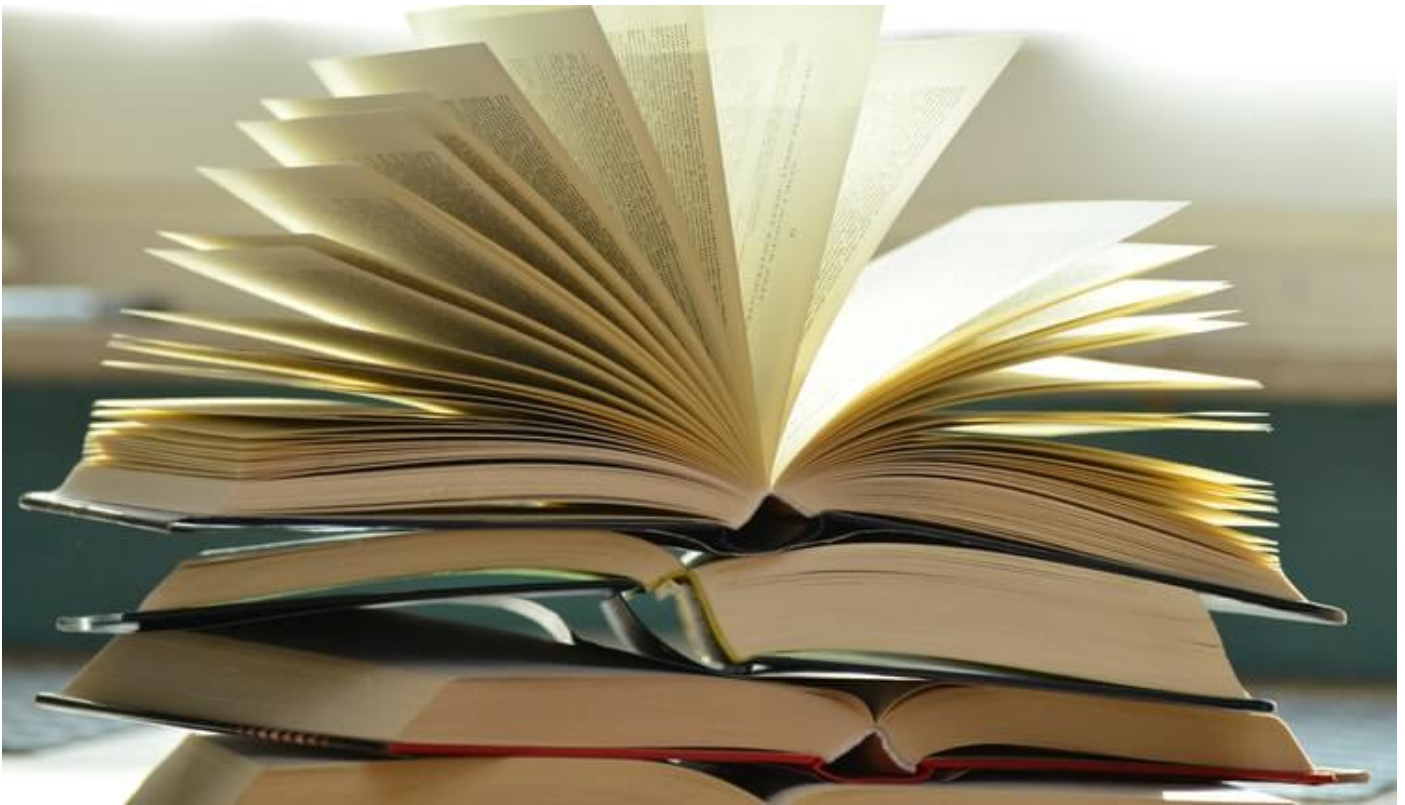
What is a Dissertation Literature Review?

A dissertation literature review is a critical assessment of pertinent literature that has been read and collated by the researcher. The purpose of a literature review for dissertation is to identify a "gap" in the existing literature that your research will attempt to address.
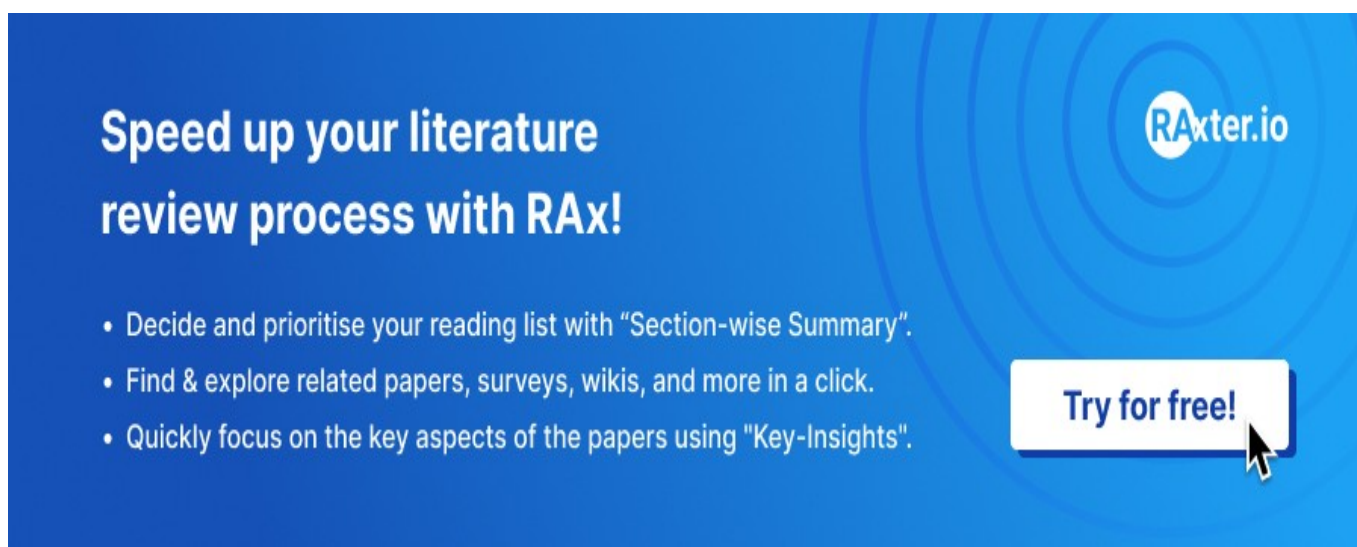
In simpler terms, a dissertation literature review can be used as a summary of important sources that are referred to while conducting research. Furthermore, it also requires a researcher to engage with the literature, and provide critiques on the same.

A dissertation literature review answers the following questions:

1. Does the literature address specific problems, hypotheses, or questions?
2. Is the scope, severity, and relevance of research clearly defined?
3. What is the author's research orientation? How is it different or similar to yours?
4. Could the problem be approached in a different way?
5. What are the interpretations of original sources? How are they different from your research design?
6. How does the author structure his/her argument?
7. How does the literature relate to your research question?
8. Will the reader be benefitted from your dissertation literature review?

How to Plan a Dissertation Literature Review?

Staying updated with new research sometimes gets difficult for researchers. Therefore, strategizing your way to dissertation literature completion is imperative.

Dissertation literature review forms the basis of the research and highlights any research gaps as support for a new argument, so you must follow well planned strategies to formulate an impactful one.

Develop a Strategy

Unless you are struggling to find a research topic and have decided to cast a wide net to see what you can find that might interest you, your literature search should have a purpose.

If you fall into the former category, you should talk to your supervisor and schedule a research consultation with a librarian to prevent yourself from wasting hundreds of hours of fruitless 'database diving.'

If you fall into the latter category, you probably already have a topic selected, and your strategy should be to build a literature review for dissertation that is comprehensive enough to establish your expertise in the topic. Despite having a research topic ready,

researchers often do not understand as to how much literature research is too much? If not everything, make sure to cover the significance! When you zero down on a research topic- jot down the main ideas, concepts, and related theories. Identify keywords and phrases specific to your research question. Use Boolean operators to optimize your search results. Use search tricks such as Phrase searching, truncation, and proximity searching to optimize your search results. Keep a track of your searches and set up alerts for any new research relevant to your topic! Collate all the required data by using keywords on multiple databases, and summarize the collated data in different sections, or under different headings. Identify any gaps in your searched data, and make sure that your systematic review warrants scope for further research.

It should also justify the need for the area of focus that you are pursuing, whether that is an identified gap in the research, or the potential for an extrapolation of an existing study.

To Replicate or Not to Replicate

If you think you have identified a gap in the research, your primary concern will be to make sure that no one else identified that gap and conducted the same study that you are proposing to do. If you are looking to replicate a study that was done ten years ago or because the results from that study were counterintuitive, replication becomes less of an issue (unless someone decides to replicate the study as well).

In either event, the last thing you want to be facing in your oral defense of your dissertation is for the examiner to ask you what you thought of Smith and Jones' 2015 study on the same topic that you didn't include in your literature review for dissertation.

A good review of the relevant literature for your proposed study has to have depth and breadth to establish your expertise and to validate the gap that you think you have identified, but it must also be as current as is physically possible. In other words, you should be checking databases right up to the day you complete your draft submission.

Focus on Filling the Gaps

Identifying the gaps in research is the most essential aspect of conducting literature review for dissertation, especially when the review forms part of your research proposal. It confirms that your research is designed to fill this gap in the pertinent literature which adds to the existing knowledge of the research field and gives scope for future research. Furthermore, identification of gap in research indicates that the researcher has conducted the review with good critical analysis.

Use the Power of Automation

If you're immersed in a particularly broad topic, the problem of staying current with the literature can be solved by the use of automation tools that your academic librarian can help you to set up:

- *Keywords* – a search algorithm can only be as focused as the words you are searching for. If your search is too vague or generic, the algorithm will return results that are of equal quality.
- *RSS Feeds & Google Alerts* – will provide notifications and links to new content that you request by keyword phrase. The information will be sent to you on a schedule that you specify.
- *Journal & Database Alerts* – will typically include the Table Of Contents (TOC) for any journal match for the search terms you specify and in some cases include a link to the full text article.

Know Your Limit

The ease with which such alerts can be set-up can be a mixed blessing. If you're not focused in your search terms and keywords, you will continue to be bombarded with new links on a daily or even hourly basis. That can be very distracting when you're trying to write your data analysis or conclusions and recommendations for future research. It is important to stay current in the literature, but not at the cost of poor analysis of your data.

Remember, the literature review for dissertation is about demonstrating your mastery of the material to the extent that you are the logical expert to pursue the research you are proposing. That is done based on quality of material and the analysis of that material. It's not about reading every piece of research you can lay your hand on.

How did you conduct your dissertation literature review? What strategies did you apply? How has literature reviewing benefitted you in finding answers to your research question? Have you ever used online tools to manage your references and literature? Let us know 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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