

## THE TRADITIONAL REVIEW

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### Key points

- Traditional reviews allow you to be flexible and to explore ideas
- They can be insightful and original
- They can be undertaken by one person at undergraduate or postgraduate level
- Subjectivity is implicit; there is no protocol but it is good practice to tell the reader on what basis the material was selected
- It is only relatively recently that the literature review has been deemed a research methodology in its own right

### Be aware

- The result depends on the skills of the writer
  - Traditional reviews can be dismissed as an 'opinion piece'
  - Traditional review is less helpful for policy development because it is not a systematic review (see Chapter 7)
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### Overview of the debate

So far in Part I of this book we have covered the early stages of doing a literature review. We have:

- identified a topic, funnelled down and decided on a specific research area and research question
- identified keywords and used the library resources to search for resources and information
- read the material, and
- made notes after reading.

Part II of the book concentrates on two different approaches to literature review. The language – or labels – used to describe literature reviews tends to be confused. So each time you read the words 'literature review' you should

check, read and categorise what type of review it is. In this book we set out to differentiate between a 'traditional literature review' and a 'systematic literature review', which has a very specific meaning. The first part of this chapter examines a selection of published reviews showing how each one has a different focus. The latter part of the chapter begins working through the review process. To make the most of this chapter you need to refer to the original article because sometimes we quote from the original work and other times we only provide a commentary.

A literature review is a desk-based research method by which the researcher critically describes and appraises what is already known about a topic using secondary sources. In some instances, a literature review is described as a traditional narrative review (Torgerson, 2003) because it consists of a narrative style of presentation.

- The traditional review, as undertaken by undergraduate and Masters-level students, aims to be comprehensive, which means it aims to present a summary review of the current state of knowledge about a particular subject.
- The traditional review also seeks to add new insights on the topic.

### Critique of traditional review

Some writers who promote a systematic review methodology take a pejorative approach to the traditional review on the grounds that it does not produce reliable evidence (see Petticrew and Roberts, 2006, on health and social care). Which approach to review you take depends on the context of review, the academic discipline of study, and the purpose. It also depends on what level of study you are at. Traditional review is the norm at undergraduate level. At postgraduate level traditional review may be less helpful for guiding policy or, as Torgerson (2003) asserts, for contributing to an informed debate of the issues in education. Critics dismiss the traditional review as of little value because it is 'non-scientific', or it is merely a discussion paper, or an opinion piece. This is because in traditional reviews the author's subjectivity is implicit; there is no protocol and quite often no description of how the review was carried out. In some journal articles, for example, there might not be a methods section to help the reader understand the choices made on selection or on the review process. The critique claims that the absence of a systematic protocol means that an uninformed reader is unable to judge the completeness of the arguments put forward in such a review (the systematic protocol is described in Chapter 7).

But the argument presented in this book is that before being able to move on to doing a systematic review you have to be confident in your searching

skills and basic reviewing ability. To start with a traditional review helps you to develop those reviewing skills and gives you the insights to enable you to work your way up to doing the systematic review. It can be argued that this form of review is a 'scoping review', that is, a review which sets the scene for a future research agenda. It is unlikely that at undergraduate level you will have the time to do more than a traditional review, but that does not mean you do not need to know what a systematic review methodology involves. Postgraduates are most likely to attempt a systematic review.

Critics of traditional narrative review argue:

- that there is no formal methodology, so there is a lack of transparency and no academic rigour
- that the reasons for including some material and excluding others is not discussed
- on selection grounds, because the review is only a small, potentially biased selection of the whole range of literature on the subject
- since there is no methodological audit trail, the review cannot be replicated by others
- that there is no quality assessment of the material included; incorrect interpretations may therefore result
- that contrary or conflicting views may not be identified or included in the review.

### When will you need to review the literature?

In Chapter 1 we suggested that there are six different scenarios when literature reviews are undertaken:

- 1 When writing a research proposal, usually for postgraduate dissertations of approximately 3,000 words in length. The review would take up approximately one-third of this word count. So this review would be a preliminary taster of the more in-depth review that you write in your dissertation. On the other hand, a proposal seeking funding for further research would be a review which summarises key findings before highlighting the knowledge gap, thereby justifying the rationale for further research.
- 2 For an undergraduate or postgraduate Masters research project, where the dissertation is between 10,000 and 20,000 words in length. The review might be one or two chapters covering policy or theory and empirical applied studies. This would be a more comprehensive review of the topic, still identifying the research gap and explaining or justifying the project.
- 3 For a doctoral dissertation.
- 4 For a journal article publishing research findings, which often begins with a summary or a section that 'strings together' the literature without providing an in-depth analysis.
- 5 When writing a literature review in its own right to provide a stand-alone review of a topic.
- 6 For evidence-based policy development.

## Types of review: critical, conceptual, state of the art, expert and scoping

To recap, traditional reviews are exploring issues, developing ideas, identifying research gaps, whereas systematic reviews are compiling evidence to answer a specific research or policy problem or question, using a protocol. It can be argued that both approaches are used to answer a research question or problem. However, the main difference is in the design and the methodological approach. Within the traditional review model, there are different types or reasons for reviewing. The type or reason is often indicated in the article title. The types are listed next and then followed by an example of each type.

- A *traditional review* usually adopts a *critical approach* which might assess theories or hypotheses by critically examining the methods and results of single primary studies, with an emphasis on background and contextual material. The material is selected in order to present an argument. Example 5.1 is a paper on marketing recycling and is representative of a typical academic paper – setting up the story so far.
- A *conceptual review* aims to synthesise areas of conceptual knowledge that contribute to a better understanding of the issues. Example 5.2 is a discussion about the two concepts: public health and population health.
- A *state-of-the-art review* brings readers up to date on the most recent research on the subject. This might be a seminal work, so it could be a useful beginning to your research project. Example 5.3 is a state-of-the-art review of green supply-chain management.
- Similarly, an *expert review* is just that, written by an acknowledged expert. This may be heavily influenced by the writer's own ideology and paradigm. Example 5.4 is an expert review on organisational and managerial change.
- A *scoping review* sets the scene for a future research agenda. This is comparable to what you have to do for your student project. The review documents what is already known, and then, using a critical analysis of the gaps in knowledge, it helps to refine the questions, concepts and theories to point the way to future research. It is also used as the first step in refining the questions for a subsequent systematic review. The output is a document which maps out the general topic area and makes recommendations for future research. Example 5.5 explores the research agenda for research on firm acquisition.

To summarise, these types of traditional review are often based on a personal selection of materials because the author has some important contribution to make to the knowledge base and the point is to help develop an argument or tell a story. This approach offers greater scope to be reflective, but may provide a one-sided or even biased argument, as discussed in Chapter 4.

**TASK**

Take a look at the contents pages of recent editions of the journal *The International Journal of Management Reviews*, which publishes only review articles (note: some articles contain no methodology section at all). You will see that the article titles carry a pointer, indicating what types of a review they are. Sometimes they declare the method, as in: 'content analysis', 'towards a conceptual model', 'a review of theories', 'towards a research agenda', 'a narrative review'.

The key point about traditional reviews is that it is not necessary to conduct a comprehensive systematic search, but you will help the reader more if the method and selection rationale is described because they will be able to judge the completeness of your argument. So, we are talking here about a search description (building on Chapter 2), then a selection rationale, prior to analysis and synthesis. The reader can then understand better the relevance and importance of the review and its findings with respect to their own information needs.

**Some examples of published traditional reviews**

To benefit from the following examples you will need to read the original papers.

**Critical reviews**

Example 5.1 is taken from Smallbone (2005), an article entitled 'How can domestic households become part of the solution to England's recycling problems?' In this article, Smallbone is reading the recycling literature from a marketing perspective. So the critical reading skill here is to apply one academic perspective, 'marketing', on to another academic perspective, in this case 'environmental studies'. Example 5.1 shows you how this review is assembled. You can see how many articles were used in the review and that having an alternative focus helps you to identify a gap.

**TASK**

It would help if you can look at Smallbone's article for yourself to see how the review is constructed (you can find it online at WileyInterscience, *Business Strategy and the Environment*, 4(2): 110–122).

The first paragraph of the review (Example 5.1, column 1) is laid out to show how it has been constructed and the behind-the-scenes reading and analysis

that underpins the statements (column 2). This opening section presents the reader with a summary overview of the current state of knowledge on the topic.

### Example 5.1

#### A critical review

Taken from a paper on recycling by Smallbone (2005), this is an example of a good critical literature review put together with survey results to make policy recommendations.

##### The original text

*The academic literature on pro-environmental behaviour and why people do and do not participate in recycling is extensive, but it is scattered in journals that range from those concerned with psychology through business, marketing and environmental science and sociology. It goes back to the 1970s, and by the mid 1980s a meta-analysis aiming to formulate a model of environmental behaviour could include 128 studies (Hines et al., 1986).*

*Despite this effort, the results are frequently contradictory and are bedevilled by differences in local rubbish collection systems, variations in cultural expectations, and reliance on self-reported behaviour and small or biased samples, leaving a recent study to conclude that current knowledge on recycling behaviour is 'fragmented and inconclusive' (Davies et al., 2002: 54).*

*Nevertheless it is possible to tease out a number of strands of thinking which together help to shed light on the validity of the three marketing assumptions described above.*

##### Deconstructing notes on the text

First sentence – tells me there is a lot of published material, and that contributions have been made from a variety of academic disciplines and perspectives.

Second sentence – tells me how old the topic is and that there is already a meta-analysis of 128 studies, published in 1986.

This is the summary analysis (an overall statement of 'what does this material tell us') and notes differences – reaffirming this opinion by citing a recent paper (at the time of writing her work).

Then she brings the paragraph back to her own research question.

Examine the paper again. You will see that Smallbone organises the material under three main headings (the framework):

- Targeting the green consumer using marketing communications.
- Green intentions and recycling behaviour.
- Could recycling become a social norm?

If we examine this structure further, we can see that each of these headings contains a varying number of paragraphs and references. This gives you an indication of how much material there was to review in total, and then how many authors had covered each theme. This information helps you, as a critical reader, to make judgements about the quantity of work reviewed and the relative importance of each topic.

- Targeting the green consumer using marketing communications – five paragraphs, covers 18 articles.
- Green intentions and recycling behaviour – three paragraphs, covers three articles.
- Could recycling become a social norm – three paragraphs, covers three articles.

Altogether, Smallbone has reviewed and analysed 24 papers.

So the critical dimension is achieved by reading the available material from a different perspective, looking at the topic through an alternative lens – the eyes of a marketing discipline. This is providing an alternative focus and that is one way that knowledge is advanced. Smallbone wants to make a point about the gap she found in the recycling knowledge and is using the literature to show that gap. In a policy-related context she wants to show that current policy may be focused on the wrong trajectory. Of course, she also wants to set the scene for future marketing campaigns.

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### Tip

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See if you can apply an alternative discipline lens to the topic you are reviewing.

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### Example 5.2

#### Conceptual reviews

An example of conceptual review in an emerging field is Kindig's article, 'Understanding population health terminology' (2007). We suggest that you look up this article to get the most out of the discussion that follows.

We have to be sure that we are in agreement that the words we use have a shared meaning and understanding. Conceptual reviews are able to compare and contrast the different ways in which authors have used a specific word or concept. The following paragraph is my observation, not a reproduction of the original text. At first glance you might not think it is a review at all, but on closer reading of the original paper you will notice that Kindig (2007) is reviewing the state of knowledge on two concepts, which are often used in a confused way in public health discourse: public health and population health. So what makes this a conceptual review?

Kindig (2007) does not contain a methods section; neither does it state that it is a literature review, although it is. The context for the paper is the realisation that the different disciplines now contributing to the discourse on public health have different understandings and use of the core concepts. Now it is not just medicine that has an input, but also epidemiology, economics, sociology and psychology. Kindig defines and discusses many of the terms and concepts characterising this emerging field. This paper is written by an expert in the field, drawing on a wealth of personal and professional experience. The concepts are *public health*, an old term whose definition was once clear but is now becoming problematic, and *population health*, a relatively new term. In the final paragraph, Kindig gives his rationale for the study. This is a policy agenda and an important research question is proposed: 'What is the optimal balance of investments in the multiple determinants of health over the life course that will maximise overall health outcomes and minimise health inequalities at the population level?' Without an agreed definition of the core concepts the subsequent research will be of little use.

Kindig faced a similar problem that students have to face. There is a research question, but before you can begin to specify the research question and design the research methodology you have to be clear how the core concepts are understood and used (operationalised). Using Kindig (2007) as an example, this paper shows the complexity that might arise when examining current literature from a different paradigm or academic discipline.

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**Tip**

Note down from each article you read how the core concepts have been used or operationalised. Are there different definitions in other disciplines and how has the definition changed over time?

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**Example 5.3**

**State-of-the-art reviews**

We have selected a paper by Srivastava (2007) as an example of a state-of-the-art review. The paper is a comprehensive review of supply chain literature on green supply. (Srivastava, 2007). This is an expert review because the authors have developed an original framework through which to analyse the known body of work, as shown in the following quotation.

The paragraph below is based solely on the journal article abstract, using the original text. Note that the published review is described as 'comprehensive and all inclusive'. It must therefore have taken a long time to do. This paper does have a detailed methodological description. So what makes this a state-of-the-art review?



A perusal of the literature showed that a broad frame of reference for this subject is not adequately developed. A succinct classification is needed. The literature on green supply chain management is covered exhaustively from its conceptualisation, primarily taking a 'reverse logic angle'. This review classifies the problem context, on the methodological approach, maps mathematical tools and provides a timeline. (Srivastava, 2007: 53)

### Example 5.4

#### Expert reviews

Ferlie is a well known expert on public policy. His review paper presents an overview of the organisational changes and management literature on recent large scale change within health care organisations. Ferlie notes that seven critics may argue that the approach adopted here is too subjective in orientation (Ferlie, 1997: 181). This example of a literature review is a self-declared subjective selection written by an expert on the topic of organisational and managerial change. It is therefore a traditional review, not a systematic review. Ferlie (1997), as an acknowledged expert, gives his opinion on the literature as it applies to health care. This following paragraph is my observation, not the original text. So what makes this an expert review?

Ferlie (1997) explains his search and selection rationale. He observes that the subject matter is a diffuse field where the unit of analysis – organisational and managerial reform – is multifaceted. So, there is no conceptual consistency then. He observes that studies are based on diverse methodological and theoretical orientations, and randomised trials are rarely employed. Ferlie's search design consists of a two-stage model. The first stage involved a manual search of eight key journals known to the author. Ferlie traced earlier work by examining citations, and then selected those studies which *appeared to be of interest*. The second stage was the selection of a group of nine key texts which appeared to be of *particular interest*. The selected studies were chosen on the basis that:

- they discuss organisational and managerial changes in health care at a macro rather than a micro level
- they present primarily empirical data as well as interpretation
- in the *judgement of the author*, they reflect the work of established scholars and research groups working in this field as indicated by professional reputation, citation and the winning of grants.

It is the description of the methodology that tells you that this is not a systematic review and that the author has used his expert knowledge to limit the search. An insight here is that by using citations and scanning key journals it is possible to identify a useful range of information. But it is the expertise that drives selection of material.

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**Tip**

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By scanning the citation list for each article you will quickly spot the key journals publishing material on your topic. It does not take long to identify them in the search stage as the same ones keep popping up. This will help to concentrate your search.

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**Example 5.5****Scoping reviews**

Our example of a scoping review is a paper on the subject of firm acquisition by Barkema and Schijven (2008). As a reminder, a scoping review sets the scene for a future research agenda. This is my observation, not the original published text, on what makes this a scoping review.

Barkema and Schijven (2008) provide an example of a critical literature review which summarises past research and presents a research agenda for the future. Barkema and Schijven set their review of firm acquisition in the contemporary management context at the time of writing. The consensus is that most acquisitions fail. Yet despite many academic insights into what needs to be done when acquiring a new company, the same mistakes appear to be repeated. Therefore, the authors note that *there is value in taking stock of past research and in outlining what remains to be explored and in drawing an agenda for future work* (2008: 595). There is a short methods section explaining what is covered in the review – studies published since 1980 in leading management journals plus some as yet unpublished work and work from other settings. The structure of the paper is balanced, consisting of 11 pages on the past review, six pages on the future agenda, together with summary tables of the selected papers. The summary tables are the evidence, presented to the reader.

The review documents what is already known. Then, using a critical analysis of the gaps in knowledge, it helps to refine the questions, concepts and theories and thus points the way to future research. It is also used as the first step in refining the questions for a subsequent systematic review. The pages of summary present the evidence to the reader, so that you can make your own assessment of the validity of the authors' claims.

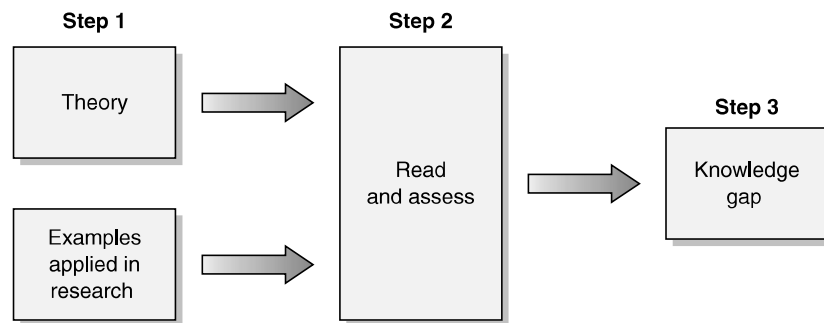
So now you have looked at some published examples of different types of traditional critical reviews, this should help when you are reading for your own literature review and give you some ideas on how to get going.

**Drawing up an analytical framework – how to sort the material**

Although you might set out with a limited plan for the scope of your research, it can actually be a fluid and flexible process. The library search will show you

the size of the body of work that exists. If you can't find anything, you may need to revise your research question or try alternative keywords. The advantage of a traditional review, which is less formally prescribed than a systematic review, is that you can add new thoughts and new themes to your plan throughout the process.

Figure 5.1 is a stylised presentation showing an overview of the typical process as straightforward and linear. Step 1 begins when you have obtained some papers, some information on theories and on the empirical applications of the theory. Step 2 is to read and begin to think what approach your critique will take. Make an analytical assessment of what you have in front of you. Step 3 is the point at which you can spot a knowledge gap.



**Figure 5.1** The analytical process

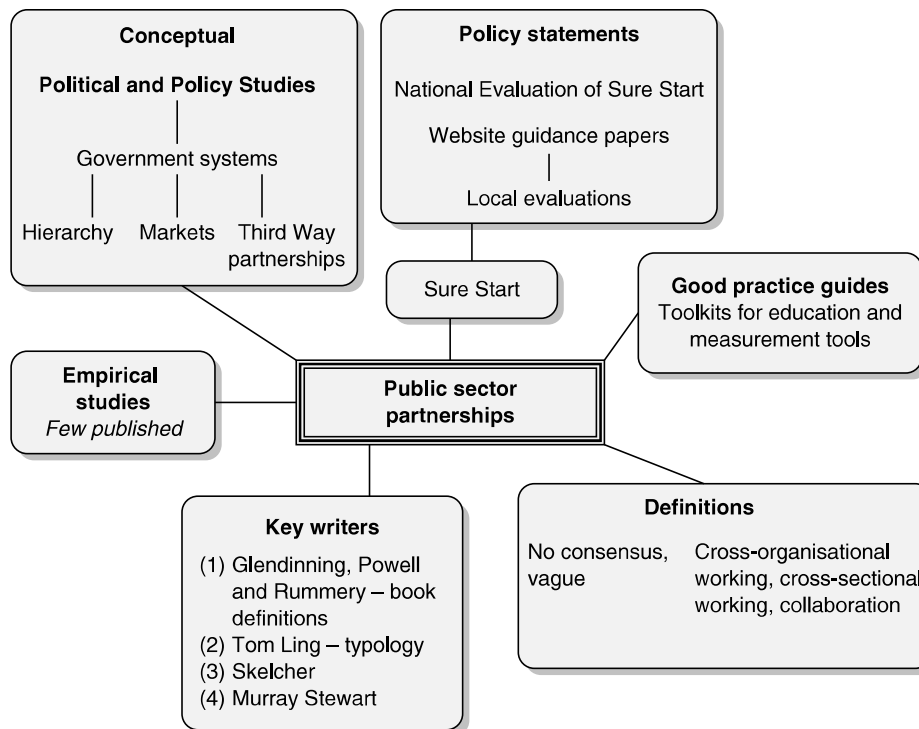
### The review process

Figure 5.1 is an abstract representation. If we take a real-world example, you can see how this might begin to work out. Remember the Smallbone (2005) example covered 24 articles, so start this process as soon as you can. Begin to make notes, categorise your papers and start to write.

### Mind map or table display of material

The assumption at this point is that you have printed off several articles and are ready to begin the next phase of analysis. One useful way to start is to lay out the material on your desk or on a big table, in bundles or piles. Figure 5.2 is based on an evaluation project where we needed to find out quickly how to evaluate a local Sure Start Partnership. Sure Start was a UK-government intervention in disadvantaged communities. The aim of the programme was to support parents of children under 5 years by bringing together all the statutory

public and voluntary services working for families – thus forming a partnership. Over six months we had gathered together huge piles of paper, on a research question ‘What is to be learned from Sure Start programme evaluations?’ Figure 5.2 represents the desk display of the different materials that were obtained. Displaying the materials in this way helped us to conceptualise the topic and create a mind map. The skills you need to perform this task are ‘differentiating’ and ‘categorising’ your data.



**Figure 5.2** Example of a mind map/table sort of materials on Sure Start public partnership evaluation

This project was about public sector partnerships, so partnerships sit at the centre of the map. Both conceptual and empirical studies were retrieved – with some overlap; there were also government practice guidelines and public partnership evaluation toolkits. After skim reading all of this material we could confidently state that there was no clear definition of public partnership. There were several abstract models and public partnership evaluation toolkits, but few empirical examples of applying these models and none applying evaluation toolkits to local Sure Start interventions. This does not mean that there were none, just that we had not yet found them because they were not in the public domain.

### Begin to categorise

So to recap. Step 1 begins when you have obtained some articles, possibly covering theories and some empirical applications of the theory. Step 2 is to read and begin to think what approach your critique will take, making an analytical assessment of what you have in front of you. Step 3 is to begin to categorise your material. The next section shows how you can take a single text and summarise the key points, authors, and concepts into a table.

Change management is a topical feature of modern management. The example on change management is summarised in Table 5.1. Shacklady-Smith (2006) advises her readers to be mindful of the historical, social, economic and political contexts when reviewing the change management literature. This is a useful example because it has several approaches, lots of empirical studies testing out the theory and a succinct critical summary and overview of the literature.

This is an example from a textbook, where the literature has already been summarised for you – remember, wherever possible you should attempt to consult the original publications to make up your own mind and develop your own critique. Nevertheless this type of review does serve as an introduction to help you get started and charts your ‘enquiry chain’ (O’Neill, 2005).

**Table 5.1** Change management theory as a topic

<i>Theoretical approaches</i>	<i>Relevant authors</i>	<i>How this differs</i>
Mechanistic and planned	Lewin, 1958	Historical beginnings
Emergent process	Burnes, 1996	Challenges Lewin
Typologies of change: Developmental Transitional Transformational	Ackerman, 1997	Modern applications
How to change organisations	Empirical case studies	Applied to real situations

Source: Shacklady-Smith (2006: )

### Moving to analysis and synthesis

So far this chapter has described different types of review and illustrated the types with published examples from a range of topics. This was followed by some advice on how to begin making sense of the literature you are reading.

In his classic text *Doing a Literature Review*, Hart (1998) has given us a checklist of the types of question you might use to interrogate an article and which will also provide a framework for your write-up:

- What are the key sources?
- What are the key theories, concepts and ideas?
- What are the key epistemological and ontological grounds for the discipline?
- What are the main questions and problems that have been addressed to date?
- How has knowledge in the topic been structured and organised?
- How have approaches to these questions increased our understanding and knowledge?
- What are the origins and definitions of the topic?
- What are the major issues and debates about the topic?

You will find your own preferred way of beginning to put information together. The process of searching, reading, then refining the scope and re-searching is a cyclical process. It is unlikely that you will do each of these activities once only. By now you will have explored several sources and articles, maybe even different sorts of literature, you will know the key issues and have found a focus for your review. Next, you have to concentrate on documenting the themes, similarities and differences in the literature you are reviewing. Synthesise on a thematic basis, so the evidence from single studies is pooled. This takes us to the next three steps towards analysis.

### Stage 1

Write a summary of the important parts of each paper; take three papers to begin with. You will start, with three sets of information and two or three themes (which might include theory, results or data analysis). Look again at Example 5.1 where Smallbone (2005) stated the three key topic areas the literature review covered. Evaluate the evidence that is presented, question for yourself how valid and reliable the evidence is. This is easier to do if you already have knowledge of one subject area and can apply it to a different discipline or a different focus, as Smallbone did with marketing and recycling. At this stage you are writing descriptively – it is just a summary. Later you will expand on the number of papers you review and build up the evidence, and maybe revise your themes as you go along.

### Stage 2

Now compare and contrast the three papers and themes: what is the same, what is similar, what is different? Write short summary paragraphs of the key points you want to make, drawing from each of the three individual extracts you produced in step 1. Now you should have one comparative set of information but it is no longer in a bibliographic format but combined. Be careful with time sequences – analyse the work in a chronological order. If it is a new subject area for you, question the plausibility. Does what you read make sense from

your own experience? You may be the person who makes a critical challenge to longstanding ideas or theory. At this stage you are writing critically.

### Stage 3

This is a cyclical process. You will read more, make more notes, and discard some notes, read and review, write, read, review. Build up your case now. It is important to document the good and negative or weak features, the strengths and limitations of the method as well as the explanatory arguments. Keep returning to your original research question, aim and objectives to make sure what you are writing is still relevant. Some students get to this point and change direction because an in-depth understanding of the problem helps them to refocus on the research problem.

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#### Tip

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When writing, check the words at the beginning of each paragraph. If each paragraph begins with an author's name then maybe you still have a format that is based on description, where each source of information is presented independently one after the other. Now repeat this test with each sentence. Try not to begin every sentence or paragraph with the author's name.

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### The presentation of your review

The aim of a traditional narrative literature review is to provide a critical review, not a description, a catalogue or shopping list. It is a new picture or story you are presenting, with your judgements made from a sound basis of evidence, reflection and sometimes experience.

Make sure that you summarise current knowledge in a clear and consistent logical way. Think of your review as a story, with an introduction, middle and end. The format could be like this:

- Introduction – guide the reader through. Give an overview of what is known and how you will present your critique – the trailer. Make the purpose clear from the start, explain the structure.
- Method – this is optional but it does help the reader to see how and from where you have obtained your information. You can also state here possible themes/issues that you have decided not to include.
- Theme 1.
- Theme 2.

- Theme 3.
- Discussion and critical summary paragraphs.
- Conclusion – states what your contribution to the debate is. Show the gap. Do not introduce new material. If relevant, how does it link into your research project?

## Summarising the gap – dare to have an opinion

You need to convince the reader that you are fully conversant with the current debate on your topic, that you know who the key writers are and the ideological agendas or perspectives from which they work. You want to be original and show how your analysis and synthesis brings insights or a new dimension to the topic. Finally, show that you have identified the knowledge gap, especially if the purpose of the review is scoping to set up a research project. Highlight any consensus, any exceptions to that consensus, and note the methodological or theoretical limitations in the work you have reviewed.

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### Summary

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This chapter has tried to tease out the different types of traditional literature review that you may encounter in your reading. Tell the reader what the purpose of your review is and what type of review it is. The traditional review is flexible. It allows us to use different types of evidence, draw on quantitative and qualitative work, on research and non-research materials. A final point is to remind you to be self-aware, reflective and critical. It remains the key research method that all students have to undertake at some point in their academic career. It does not have to be labour intensive, and can be done within the budget and time constraints of a student project. It is the first step you need to undertake before you can begin a systematic review.

In Chapter 7 we cover systematic review. To aspire to the systematic review as the gold standard is good, but first you have to know how to do an effective traditional review. Systematic reviews, if done properly, are time-consuming, expensive and are usually undertaken by a team of research assistants and researchers. Researchers who produce systematic reviews have to have an overview of the current literature. In effect, they have insights from a scoping review to formulate or modify the research question, before they can apply the specific research question and designate the inclusion and exclusion criteria.



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# 6

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## WRITING UP YOUR REVIEW

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### Key Points

- A good review is more than a description, it critically compares and contrasts
- A good review is original, perceptive and analytical
- A good review is based on a fair (unbiased) selection of sources
- A good review identifies the knowledge gaps

#### Be aware

- A good review is not a descriptive list
  - A good review is not a book-by-book, article-by-article summary
  - A good review is not an annotated bibliography or a simple write-up of statements describing the information in each article
  - A good review is not a series of paragraphs describing each source separately
  - A good review is not regurgitating the findings by stringing quotes from several sources.
  - A good review is not presented in alphabetical order
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### Overview

To recap, where are we now? In Chapter 5 we established a number of reasons for undertaking a review. We described a traditional review as a comprehensive review which summarises past research and draws conclusions. The traditional review can take many forms. Depending on the purpose of the review, it is usually critical, but it may also be a conceptual review, a state-of-the-art review, an expert review or a scoping review. We emphasised that a good review must be more than descriptive: it should be original, perceptive, and analytical, based on a fair selection of sources. Then the critical comparison and contrasting of ideas and evidence leads into the gap of what still needs to be known and researched. So now, in Chapter 6, we give you more guidance

and advice on how to avoid some of the most common pitfalls made by those new to academic writing and discussion in compiling a traditional review. First, let's think about some key formats that you will encounter – the abstract, the summary and an annotated bibliography.

During your research methodology training you will be exposed to several research methods textbooks. When we began teaching critical literature review to postgraduate students ten years ago it was noticeable that at that time very few authors included a chapter on review, and even when they did the body of material consisted mainly of descriptions of the search and assessments of various types of evidence (for example, Bryman, 2004). These days, possibly as a result of the growing interest in systematic review (see Chapter 7), more has been written. But there still remains a gap in textbooks on guidance in putting the material together and writing the review. So, in this chapter, we draw on some published work and student reviews to illustrate what to do and what to avoid.

There are two ways, or formats, of presenting your review, depending on the context:

- 1 A short summary.
- 2 A self-standing review.

It is the latter that will form the majority of guidance in this chapter.

### **A short summary**

The simplest format of review is a summary of the relevant literature. This format is often found as an introduction to an article that is presenting a new empirical study. Depending on the journal and traditions of the discipline, the scope of this example of a review is typically very short and narrow. Another way to describe this format is as a fact-building approach, which can be labelled 'stringing' or, by Metcalfe (2003), as the 'dump' method.

#### **Stringing or the dump method**

Essentially, this short summary review is 'stringing'. I have called this 'stringing' because you string together a range of work into two or three paragraphs but without actually developing the material, describing the context or comparing or contrasting the findings. This format is used specifically when several references support a statement or when a topic or issue has been explored by a number of authors.

### Example 6.1

#### Stringing

This is a paragraph taken from a report on pharmacy practice research. The paragraph from Wilson and Jesson (2003) summarises in six lines some of the key articles covering ways of improving repeat prescribing:

A variety of methods have been used, including visits of community pharmacists to GPs to discuss prescribing in specific therapeutic areas (NPC and NHSE, 1998), review of patient records by pharmacists (Sykes et al., 1996; Goldstein et al., 1997; Granas and Bates, 1999) and clinical medication reviews at the practice or patient's home (Burtonwood et al., 1998; Mackie et al., 1999; Krska et al., 2000; Zermansky et al., 2001). (Wilson and Jesson, 2003: 225)

You will observe that there is very little detail of the context or content of the articles referenced. There is a very sweeping, generalised statement followed by a list of references. The reader has to do the work, the writers assume that they are speaking to an informed audience who are familiar with the topic and know the authors and references, or they will follow up the references. This type of summary is typical of journals that have a 3,000 word limit.

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#### Tip

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Look for yourself and see whether this is a feature in your discipline. When you have obtained two or three published articles begin with the literature review, usually at the beginning of an article, and see whether the author has given sufficient information. To follow up key articles is a good starting point if you are new to the topic.

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The following sentence is taken from the first draft of a student review:

Recycling is a premier example of the collective coproduction of a local government program (Brudney 1990; Brudney and England 1983; Ferris 1984, 1988; Sundeen 1998).

This stringing sentence tells the reader that the following authors have made some observation about recycling and local government and that this is a long-standing phenomenon covering the period 1983–1998. If you are going to use

stringing sentences, then the presentation can be improved by putting the dates in chronological rather than alphabetical order:

Recycling is a premier example of the collective coproduction of a local government program (Brudney and England, 1983; Ferris, 1984, 1988; Brudney, 1990; Sundeen, 1998).

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**Tip**

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When you write your review, pay attention to the referencing format required by your institution.

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## **A self-standing review**

Next, we will consider a self standing review, by which we mean a complete review that goes into more detail than an abstract and is a coherent body of work in its own right. We assume that you will be writing in greater detail than in a summary stringing review. Different disciplines have different expectations about the format that a traditional review will take. However, we have found the following advice to be useful with our students.

### **Structure and writing up**

The traditional review is presented like any other essay. That is: with an Abstract or Summary, Introduction, Middle (main body divided into sub-topics), and a Conclusion, as shown in Table 6.1. This formula may vary depending on your subject and discipline. Always check with your supervisor what the requirements are. For example, rather than a short 350-word abstract, you may be asked to write an extended abstract or even an executive summary. The right-hand column in Table 6.1 offers a suggestion on length, but this is a very personal and contextual issue that you have to decide for yourself. If you have a mature topic or type of knowledge, then the number of articles will be large and your review could be lengthy, whereas there will be fewer published materials on an emerging issue and therefore it could be a short review.

It is not necessary to copy out all the methodological details of each study – you have given a reference so the reader can do that if it is relevant – but what we need to know are the key points and that depends on the framework and focus of your research question. What you impart to the reader has to reinforce your argument. For instance, if the article you are reviewing is an empirical

**Table 6.1** The structure of a traditional narrative literature review

<i>Section</i>	<i>Contents</i>	<i>Suggested length</i>
<b>Abstract</b>	A succinct summary of the whole review	Up to 350 words
<b>Introduction</b>	What is the basic aim, goal of the review? Why is the subject of interest? What is the scale and scope of the review? What is included and excluded? What are the focus, basic definitions and concepts? Is it a mature or emerging topic? Explain the organisation of the review – sequence of themes. Trailer – what will follow?	2–3 lines per sentence 3 sentences per paragraph Each paragraph has a new topic From 3–6 paragraphs expect to cover 3–6 topics
<b>Main body</b> Sub-topics Link paragraphs together by the first and last sentences	This section depends on your topic. These are just suggestions: (a) Methodological frameworks (b) Conceptual evolution (c) Theme 1 (d) Theme 2 (e) Theme 3  Is your discussion within each theme or do you need additional discussion paragraphs to bring the work together?	3 sentences per paragraph
<b>Conclusion</b> The gap	Relate back to the introduction, purpose, aim and objectives Summarise the important aspects in the review Evaluate the current state of the literature Identify flaws or gaps in existing knowledge Outline areas for future research Lead into your research proposal	From 3–6 paragraphs 3 sentences per paragraph

research study, what is it about the design, sampling, data collection, analysis or conclusion that are noteworthy? Obviously, if the articles under review are policy papers or theoretical conceptual papers, then the approach will be different.

### **Abstract, executive summary and annotated bibliography**

This section tells you what an abstract is. It tells you how to write an abstract and shows how abstracts are collated to form an annotated bibliography. It is important to differentiate between an abstract, an annotated bibliography and a review. Avoid using abstracts as your sole source of information; always check with the complete article.

### What is an abstract?

An abstract is a short summary of an academic paper. Abstracts are important for three reasons:

- 1 They help you to undertake the search for literature (see Chapter 2) because databases will show you an abstract of the whole article.
- 2 They help you to make your decision on whether the article is relevant to your review
- 3 They are a model in that they show you how to write your own.

The reason abstracts are raised here is that some of those new to academic writing produce a literature review which reads like a series of abstracts. There is one paragraph for each article, but this format is never followed through to the next analytical stage of providing a critical comparison. There is no common theme or argument running through or linking the abstracts. Abstracts are purely condensed, succinct, descriptive summaries found at the beginning of a scholarly journal or in periodical indexes.

By comparison, when you write an abstract for your own review, the abstract should be able to stand on its own. The format for writing an abstract varies (see Table 6.2). Based on journal requirements, they can be either structured or flexible.

**Table 6.2** Examples of some journal abstract formats

<i>Journal</i>	<i>Abstract requirements</i>
Medical journals	Introduction Method Results Discussion
Emerald Journals, e.g. <i>European Journal of Marketing</i>	Purpose Design/methodological approach Findings Research limitations/implications Practical implications Originality/value Keywords Paper type Maximum 250 words
<i>Resources, Conservation and Recycling</i>	Not structured. A succinct abstract of no more than 300 words, clearly describing the entire paper

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**Tip**

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Emeraldinsight have published a really useful guide, *How to ... write an abstract* (Elsevier, 2008).

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In their instructions for authors, journals usually specify the number of words allowed for an abstract and for the article. You are allowed typically no more than 500 words for an abstract. If you are not writing for a journal but for an academic dissertation, then you will write a summary. Try to summarise your work on to one page – this is your version of an abstract.

There are two important points to remember about abstracts:

- 1 Do not rely on a journal abstract only when researching a topic. Obtain the original and make your own evaluation of the work.
- 2 Do not write sentences in your review based solely on an abstract.

**Executive summary**

An executive summary is not an abstract. It is a summation of the key findings, implications and recommendations of a report. The executive summary usually appears at the front of a report. The styles of writing and contents vary. Sometimes there can be up to four pages summarising the aim, objectives, context, methods and results. Quite often, however, the key findings and implications only are provided, in which case the reader has to read the complete report to find out other details.

**Annotated bibliography**

Another error new writers might make when writing up a traditional narrative review is to write a series of paragraphs, or abstracts, which read like an annotated bibliography. An annotated bibliography is really a series of notes about other articles. The purpose of an annotated bibliography is to present an overview of the published literature on a topic by summarising the key articles. Olin and Uris libraries (2008) offers practical advice on preparing an annotated bibliography.

An annotated bibliography is a list of citations to books, articles and documents. Each citation is followed by a brief (usually about 150 words) descriptive and evaluative paragraph, the annotation. The purpose of the annotation is to inform the reader of the relevance, accuracy and quality of the sources cited. The annotation is a concise and succinct analysis. (Olin and Uris libraries, 2008)

To write an annotated bibliography you need to summarise each article briefly. Be careful not to confuse an annotated bibliography with a bibliographic database, as described in Chapter 2. There are various kinds of annotated bibliography. Most annotated bibliographies include an introduction, which sets out the purpose of the review and a methods section, which describes the selection of sources cited. Table 6.3 lists three reviews, comparing the purpose and presentational approach of the results.

**Table 6.3** Selected annotated bibliographies

<i>Annotated bibliography</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Organising structure</i>
Macinko and Starfield (2002)	To present an overview of the published literature on equity in health and to summarise key articles relevant to the mission of the International Society for Equity in Health.	Authors provide short summaries of examples of different approaches to studying health equity, rather than providing an exhaustive list of equity-related articles.  The articles are subdivided into four categories.  The reviews are one or two paragraphs in length.
Ceglowski and Bacigalupa (2002)	To update an earlier review on childcare research undertaken in 1987.	The review is organised in four sections, covering the same questions as those asked in 1987.  Results are presented in tabular format, with references beneath each table.
Kendall et al. (2009)	First, to present a comprehensive list of sports scheduling papers, to serve as a starting point for those requiring information and to those wishing to update their knowledge.  Second, to present the methodologies that have been used in solving these types of problem.	Articles are numbered 1 to 162 and organised in four sections.  The summaries are one or two sentences in length.

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**Tip**

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You will probably begin your review by writing in an annotated bibliographic format. Resist the temptation, but if you cannot, then you have to move on to stage 2 – integrating.

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### Task

Look at some other annotated bibliographies. Two examples from the subject of marketing are: 'Studies of negative political advertising: an annotated bibliography' (Hartman, 2000) and 'Towards effective poster presentations: an annotated bibliography' (Brownlie, 2007). Note that there is no summary discussion or conclusion to an annotated bibliography.

If you stop writing at this point you have only done half a review. An 'ordinary' review can often be descriptive and mechanical, whereby the writer simply summarises the information from a range of documents in chronological or alphabetical order. *This format does not get you high marks.* A literature review should *not* be merely a list describing or summarising one article after another. It has to be discursive, analysed prose. The reader wants to gain more from reading your review, to understand more, than a simple list or 'string' of previous publications would provide. So we are looking for not an annotated bibliography but an argued analytical review.

## Writing the review

### An analytical framework

The review must have a guiding aim or goal. What is the research question? How does the review inform the research question? What is the purpose, scope, length of the review? You must tell the reader what ideas and knowledge are established because it sets the scope of the review and helps them decide whether the review will be useful.

You organise the review into sections that present themes or theory based on what you are looking for in each article.

Move forward in a chronological order, from the oldest articles first, and then show to what extent later research *confirms* or *refutes* those earlier studies. That is how the review develops these ideas.

In Example 6.2, Tuch and O'Sullivan (2007) present a review of empirical research on the impact of acquisitions on firm performance. They have pre-understanding. That means they are already familiar with the literature and they already have a good idea of the body of knowledge, but they want to bring it together in a comprehensive review. Their hypothesis is that, in practice, the promised gains are not easily identified. They state that the search has been limited to studies in accounting and finance – thus setting the selective paradigm from which the evidence will be collated. Example 6.2 shows the organisational structure of the article – in six sections.

## Example 6.2

### Acquisitions

This example shows the analytical framework for the review. The words in italics are from the original. The topic is the impact of acquisitions on firm performance: a review of the evidence (Tuch and O'Sullivan, 2007).

<b>Framework of the original paper</b>	<b>Comment on content or purpose of each section</b>
<p><b>Introduction</b> Includes an overview of the topic. The purpose of the article. Description of the methodological approach – what is covered and excluded.</p>	<p>The introduction sets up the story for the reader.</p>
<p><b>A Review of Acquirer Performance</b> <i>Evidence from Event Study Research</i> <i>Short-run event studies, Long-run event studies</i> <i>Evidence from Accounting Research</i></p>	<p>The description of the method serves as a trailer for what follows – introducing the key themes Main heading Three subheaded sections Within each section the perceived weaknesses of the methodology are discussed</p>
<p><b>The Impact of Bid Characteristics on Performance</b> <i>The mood of acquisition</i> <i>Method of payment</i> <i>Relative size of target and bidder</i> <i>Industrial relatedness of the bidder and target</i></p>	<p>Main heading Four subheaded sections</p>
<p><b>The Role of Pre-bid Performance</b></p>	
<p><b>Discussion</b></p>	
<p><b>Conclusion</b></p>	

This example on mergers and acquisition is a traditional review because the style of review and the presentation of the analysis are based on the authors' pre-understanding of the current literature. It is not a systematic review because it has not followed the systematic review methodology. Authors have selected material to include and made decisions on what to exclude, but the basis of this decision process is not clear. The article demonstrates a higher level of integrating the information than a shopping list of articles, whether in alphabetical or chronological order. By setting up themes, the authors produce a more comprehensive *analysis* of the contents than is possible in the annotated bibliography format. There is a flow of ideas which

combines several sources, reinforcing the importance of each idea. The reader therefore gains a much better understanding based on the authors' opinions.

### Key words or phrases to help you move from stage 1 to stage 2

So far in this chapter we have explained the purpose of different short summaries of literature. We assume that you are now ready to move on to writing a more comprehensive version of your review. At this stage, you have decided on your selection of articles to review, drawn up an analytical framework and now you have to start writing.

#### Choosing a good writing style

A good approach to writing is to list article you have read. Table 6.4 shows how the beginning of each sentence looks to the reader. What this tells the reader is that what follows is likely to be based on a summary paragraph only.

**Table 6.4** Writing styles – opening sentence (note the date order)

<i>Good opening style</i>	<i>Opening style to avoid</i>
Early work by Thomas (1996) shows that...	Thomas (1996) said...
Another study on the topic by Brown (2000) asserts that...	Brown said (2000)...
The latest research (Smith, 2003) shows...	Smith (2003) wrote...

However, beginning every paragraph with the authors' names is not a good review – it is a bibliography list. You have to juxtapose and link ideas. Be critical, be comparative. Below is some guidance on how to write an argued, critical sentence. Example 6.3 is taken from a Masters-level research proposal. The paragraph summarises three sources of financial performance measurement literature.

### Example 6.3

#### Masters-level review, using a comparative style

This section will analyse the traditional performance measurement systems, which according to Broadbent (1999) are bound up with the manner in which financial reports have evolved. As Brignall (1998: xxx) identified, 'the measurement of financial performance is intended

to ensure the attainment of an organisation's financial objectives: the focus of budgetary control'. Also, as Johnson and Clark (2002) added, financial measures are easy to apply and understand and, most importantly, they allow for both internal and external benchmarking. Moreover, as Whiting (1986) noted, financial measures allow a company's stakeholders to measure its performance in an easily comparable manner.

- 1 The first sentence is the trailer, telling the reader what follows and noting the context of performance measurement.
- 2 Each source used is a textbook.
- 3 Instead of beginning each sentence with: Brignell..., Johnson and Clark..., Whiting..., the author has used comparative devices to enhance the readability:

As Brignell identified...,  
 Also, as Johnson and Clark added...  
 Moreover, as Whiting noted...

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**Tip**

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Avoid writing words such as 'Brown *thinks...*' or 'Smith *feels...*'. It is better to write 'Brown *discusses...*', 'Brown *argues...*', or 'Brown *considers...*'.

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To help develop a critical analytical approach you can group sources together by using connecting, linking words such as: *also, additionally, again, similarly, a similar opinion*. Alternatively, you can group contrasting ideas together, using words such as *however, conversely, on the other hand, nevertheless, a contrasting opinion, a different approach*. The use of an approach that links ideas is also a device to avoid starting every sentence with an author's name! When you report on the ideas or arguments proposed by an author, use words such as '*According to Smith...*' or '*as Brown argues convincingly*', or '*the author states...*'. Table 6.5 sets out a list of synonyms, which are alternative words or verbs for saying something similar, that you might find useful.

**Table 6.5** Verbs and synonyms, to use in writing about text and making an argument

<i>Account for</i>	<i>Clarify</i>	<i>Describe</i>	<i>Exemplify</i>	<i>Investigate</i>	<i>Recognise</i>
Analyse	Compare and contrast	Determine	Expand	Judge	Reflect
Argues	Conclude	Discuss	Explain	Justify	Refer to
Assess	Criticise	Distinguish	Exhibit	Narrate	Relate to
	Debate	Differentiate	Identify	Outline	Report
Assert	Defend	Evaluate	Illustrate	Persuade	Review
Assume	Define	Emphasise	Imply	Propose	Suggest
Claim	Demonstrate	Examine	Indicate	Question	Summarise

However, some may or may not be appropriate, depending on the context of your review.

Browne and Keeley (2004) have compiled a useful checklist to use when developing critical reading skills. The words or phrases listed in Table 6.6 can equally be applied to critical writing.

**Table 6.6** Forming critical sentences using signalling words

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As a consequence of x then y
Consequently, ...
Hence ...
Therefore, ...
Thus ...
In short ...
In effect ... / It follows that ...
This indicates that ...
This suggests that ...
It should be clear now that ... / The point I am making is ...
This points to the conclusion that ...
The most obvious explanation is ...
This means that ...
Finally, ...

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Source: Brown and Keeley (2004)

Making an argument within the context of critical writing means presenting reasons to support your point of view. An argument includes:

- outlining a position or point of view
- attempting to persuade others to accept your point of view
- giving reasons to support your view.

A good review can be improved by adding ‘transition statements’. This means using signalling language to inform the reader which direction the review is taking.

### **The ‘so what?’ question, originality and making a value judgement**

The literature review needs to flow. It should not be an aimless description of unlinked theories and ideas. Try to link up each paragraph with the next one. At the end of the review ask yourself ‘so what?’ This will take you on to the summary and conclusion.

Most reviews will present their ideas for future research, which is ‘the gap’ in knowledge. Returning to Example 6.2, Tuch and O’Sullivan (2007) make several suggestions in their conclusion, but to note just three here:

- 1 To examine the relationship between the monitoring potential of acquiring boards and subsequent performance.
- 2 To research the decision-making and monitoring of the board in takeover bids.
- 3 To undertake a comprehensive analysis of the performance implications of failed bids, incorporating the reasons for failures.

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### Summary

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Chapters 5 and 6 should be read as a package because they concentrate on how to undertake a traditional literature review. Chapter 5 showed you the various types of traditional review that you might encounter: critical, conceptual, state-of-the-art, expert and scoping reviews. Each one serves a different purpose and often can stand alone as a form of review.

Chapter 6 continued the work on traditional literature review by drawing attention to more formats and concepts that you will encounter. Writing an abstract is probably the final act before completing your review, but this advice is given early because we would prefer that you do not rely solely on published abstracts as a basis for your review. It is important to know the difference between an annotated bibliography and a literature review because of the temptation to write a review that looks like an annotated bibliography. Finally, you can improve your writing and make it more critical by using keywords that force you to rearrange the structure of each sentence and paragraph. Chapters 7 and 8 describe the process required for undertaking a systematic review. If you are undertaking a traditional review you may want to go straight to Chapter 9 to revise referencing styles.