

Writing the Winning Thesis or Dissertation

Fourth Edition

A Step-by-Step Guide

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CHAPTER

6

THE FOCUSED REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

With the research problem identified, you should next conduct a focused review of the literature. Whereas the broad scan helped you identify a research topic and problem, the focused review will help you develop a prospectus and a proposal. A *prospectus* is a preliminary outline of the proposal that will help your committee provide input for the proposal itself; the *proposal* is a research contract that details specifically for you and your committee the elements of your research plan. Chapter 10 explains how to develop the prospectus; Chapter 11 focuses on the proposal.

Reorganize Your Files

In identifying a research problem, you probably found it helpful to organize your files according to the topics you were investigating. In doing the focused review, you should organize your files by the divisions of the research problem you have chosen. Suppose, for example, that your research problem is “factors that influence the motivation of high school students to learn in learning communities.” Based on your reading, your knowledge of what the proposal will require, and your sense about the direction of your study, you might use these categories with respect to the research problem:

- Theories or conceptual frameworks of motivation to learn
- Research methods in studying motivation to learn

- General findings with respect to motivation to learn
- Motivation to learn specific subjects
- Factors affecting motivation to learn
- Motivation to learn for high school students in traditional learning environments
- Motivation to learn for high school students in smaller learning communities

As you continue to review the literature, you will find it helpful to reassess your filing system and reorganize it as needed. At this stage, you should see your files as an evolving set of documents.

Retrieve All Related Abstracts

The next step in the process is to retrieve all the sources that seem to be useful and are available. The easiest way to accomplish this step is through a computerized search of the databases available on the Internet or through your university library. For the comprehensive critique in the dissertation, you will need to consider all available resources; however, for the prospectus and proposal, a search of computerized databases should suffice. More than likely, the one you will find most useful is ERIC—the world's largest digital library of education literature (<https://eric.ed.gov/>)—since it collects sources in the field of education. If your research problem involves a psychological aspect, you might also find the PsycLIT database useful, since it focuses on psychology. Both ERIC and PsycLIT, for example, include sources on motivation.

The discussion that follows provides some general guidelines for doing an online search. The technology is changing so rapidly, however, that you should check with a reference librarian for current specific suggestions for doing a computerized search.

In getting ready to use one of these databases, you should find its thesaurus helpful. In information retrieval, the thesaurus is a catalog of the terms (called *descriptors*) used to search the database. The thesaurus

also identifies other search limitations, such as type of document, educational level, and years covered. Check with the librarian for help using the thesaurus and to determine which years are available in print and which years are available electronically. Or access ERIC by visiting <http://www.eric.ed.gov>.

Use the appropriate descriptors to search the database, using an “abstract” format. Information specialists use three terms in specifying format. *Bibliographic information* gives you author, title, date of publication, and other identifying information about the source. *Abstract* adds a summary of the contents, written by the author of the report. *Full text* is the complete text—the entire paper or article. At this stage, you should find abstracts most useful.

If you encounter any problems using the computerized database, confer with a reference librarian, who can advise you in search strategies. In addition to accessing computerized databases, you should also locate and retrieve any sources listed in the research reviews that look promising. Keep in mind that at this stage you are trying to identify the major sources so you will be well informed about the research on your topic. You are not trying to capture every reference.

Evaluate the Results

Now you need to evaluate the results of your search, since much of what you have retrieved will not be of use. The following guidelines should be useful here.

1. *Check the author.* If you recognize the author's name from your previous reading, the source is likely to be important. For example, any report by Henry Peel on leadership is likely to be useful, since he is considered one of the leading authorities in the field.
2. *Check the title.* If the title suggests that the article is a report of practice, the article will be less useful. Contrast these two titles: “Block Scheduling as a Motivation Tool in the Secondary School!” and “Student Performance in Block Scheduled Smaller Learning Communities Classes.” The first does not sound too

useful; the title implies that it is an enthusiastic report of one school's experience written by one of the faculty—a practitioner's report. The second sounds like a research report. At this stage of your reading, concentrate on research studies, not reports of practice. However, both research and practice reports may be of value for the completed document.

3. *Check the date.* Generally, unless you are conducting a historical review, you should give more weight to recent studies. Here's a rough rule of thumb: For the prospectus and the proposal, emphasize the most recent ten years.
4. *Note the source.* In general, give greater consideration to journals that publish research reports and reviews. Give less consideration to periodicals read chiefly by practitioners. For example, *Business Education Forum* is a fine periodical for practitioners, usually including articles that report on one school's experience. It tends not to publish research reports. On the other hand, the *Delta Pi Epsilon Journal* usually includes research reports. This latter journal is also a refereed journal, meaning that all articles must be approved by experts in the field before they are published. Usually, research articles in refereed journals will be most useful. Check with a periodicals librarian who can help you determine if a given periodical is refereed.
5. *Check the document type.* You should give the highest priority to sources identified as information analyses. These terms are also used to identify research reports: research review, review of the research, meta-analysis, and a review of the literature.
6. *Read the abstract.* The abstract should give you a good idea about the potential usefulness of the source.

Based on your analysis of these factors, code each source with number 1, 2, or 3 as follows:

1. This is a "must-have" source; it is on target and sounds very useful.
2. This is a "maybe" source; it might be helpful and should be checked if I have the time and need additional sources.
3. This is a "no" source; it is not useful at all.

Check for Prior Dissertations

This is also a good time to determine if any dissertations have been completed on your topic. Use a database called ProQuest: Dissertations & Theses. If that database indicates that someone in another university has already completed a dissertation on your topic, confer with the librarian to determine how you can secure a copy. Do not despair if you find one or more dissertations have already been completed on a topic you have chosen. You can always find ways of making your dissertation sufficiently distinct. A dissertation topic cannot be covered by a copyright.

Retrieve the Full Texts of the Most Useful Sources

With these evaluations made, you should next retrieve the full text of all useful sources. Begin by retrieving the full text of your number 1 sources. Regardless, be certain to obtain relevant bibliographic information, because the information may be needed later. One suggestion is to photocopy the title page of the source and, on that page, record the name of the publication, the volume and issue number, and the appropriate page numbers. Doing so will save time as the date of the final defense approaches. Here is some general advice about retrieving full texts.

Books: Buy them if in print, borrow them from the library, or use inter-library loan. The Internet lists all libraries whose catalogs are searchable on the Internet.

Chapters in books: Copy the chapter.

Dissertations: You can borrow the dissertation from the library of the university conferring the degree. Or you may order it through <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/support/contact>.

Journal articles: In doing an ERIC search, you will note at the top a document number. Some are preceded with the symbol ED, others with EJ. The ED denotes that the source is a research document available on microfiche. Most research libraries contain all the fiches produced by

ERIC and the equipment necessary to read and print from the fiche. The symbol EJ indicates that the source is an article from a journal. You will need to consult the journal for the full text of EJ sources. An increasing number of research reports are available in full text via the computer. Check with a reference librarian for current information.

If you find that you do not have enough number 1 sources for your prospectus, then move to the number 2 sources. A very rough rule of thumb is to have between 15 and 20 sources for the prospectus and from 25 to 50 for the proposal and the dissertation. However, keep in mind that the author of the dissertation needs to be “all-knowing” about the research topic. Therefore, the number of needed sources is likely to vary based on the dissertation topic and research problem. Be sure to keep all the sources and your evaluations. You may find it necessary to retrieve those you have rated 2, and you might even reconsider the 3s. Also be sure to update your search record and continue to keep your journal.

Use Primary Sources

At this stage and all succeeding stages in the dissertation process, keep in mind a crucial distinction between primary and secondary sources. A primary source is the original report; a secondary source is an article that refers to the primary source.

To illustrate the difference, consider these examples. Shore conducts a study on motivation and reports the results in a journal article. The Shore report is a primary source. Pate publishes a review of the research on motivation in which he cites the Shore report; in this situation the Pate article is a secondary source. Good researchers do not rely on a secondary source; they search for and retrieve the primary source. Secondary sources may sometimes distort the findings of the primary source, and they do not provide sufficient detail.

Develop an Annotated Bibliography

At this stage, you should find it helpful to develop an annotated bibliography. Check with your dissertation adviser to determine if he or she

EXAMPLE OF ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

TOPIC: Teacher Certification

DATABASE SEARCHED: ERIC

DESCRIPTORS USED: Teacher Certification

YEARS SEARCHED: 2000–present

Simpkins, Jim. (2011). What does Washington State get for its investment in bonuses for board certified teachers? Schools in crisis: Making ends meet. ED 517748; Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington.

Approximately \$100 million will be spent by Washington State to fund bonuses for teachers who receive national board certification. The intent of the investment is to improve the state's teaching force and encourage the most capable teachers to work in high-poverty schools. Does it accomplish those goals? Includes extensive bibliography. Good summary—but limited. USEFULNESS SCORE: 2.

Exhibit 6.1

has any special requirements for the annotated bibliography. Following are the elements usually included.

- An explanation of the search and retrieval process you used, including the database searched, the descriptors used, the publication dates, and other limiters
- Complete listing of the bibliographical information, using the latest edition of the APA style manual and listed alphabetically
- A brief summary and evaluation of the source

Exhibit 6.1 shows one item in an annotated bibliography.

CHAPTER

1

COMPREHENSIVE CRITIQUE OF THE LITERATURE

Before explaining how to conduct a comprehensive critique of the literature, it might be useful to go over the three types of literature review again: the broad scan, the focused review, and the comprehensive critique. As explained previously, the broad scan relies chiefly on reviews of the literature to help you identify a research problem. The focused review mainly uses ERIC or other electronic databases to assist you in providing a knowledge base for your prospectus. The comprehensive critique uses all available sources to locate any research that has a direct bearing on your research problem; it also involves the use of your critical judgment in assessing the quality of the research. When you write your prospectus and the literature chapter in your dissertation, you will use relevant sources located in all three phases. Those identified in the comprehensive critique will probably be the most helpful and useful.

Maintain Good Research Practices Throughout the Search

As you conduct the comprehensive critique, be sure to keep in mind and apply sound research practices, as follows:

1. Maintain your search record. A current search record will help your chair and the reference librarians suggest additional sources.

2. Keep your research journal. Make entries that reflect your progress and your problems.
3. Make photocopies of all sources. In the comprehensive critique, you should rely on full-text, primary sources rather than abstracted or secondary ones.
4. Be sure that the photocopy has full bibliographic information. Check all entries for accuracy.
5. Check the reference list of every source you have located. That reference list will give you leads to additional sources.
6. If you store information in a computer file, back up all files.
7. Get expert help whenever you need it—from your committee, reference librarians, and other students.
8. Keep your dissertation chair informed about progress and problems.

You may also find it useful at this stage to create, establish, and maintain a home page on the Internet so others interested in your research problem can keep in touch with you.

Develop a Focused Outline of the Search

Before undertaking the comprehensive critique, you should develop an outline for the search. If you have already developed a topical filing system, as suggested earlier, you should review it to be sure it reflects your current understanding of the literature relating to your research problem. You also should review the sources you have identified, as a way of noting the logical divisions of the problem. The search outline you develop should be sufficiently broad in scope to include all the issues you will need to deal with in the literature chapter—but not so broad that you sacrifice depth for coverage.

This latter point needs special emphasis. Many student researchers make the mistake of writing a review that is broad but superficial. If you read research reports in scholarly journals, you will notice that the review of the literature is narrowly focused, not broadly conceived. To

clarify this matter, suppose you are doing a study on teacher-centered leadership in curriculum development. Here is an outline that is much too broad:

1. The definition of *leadership*
2. The nature of curriculum leadership
3. Leadership in site-based management models
4. The nature of teacher leadership
5. The history of teacher leadership
6. Teacher leadership in curriculum
7. Teacher leadership in other areas

The outline above includes so many topics that each issue would necessarily be treated briefly. Contrast that outline with this one that focuses directly on the topic:

1. Teacher-centered curriculum leadership from a historical perspective
2. Teacher curriculum leadership in elementary schools
3. Teacher curriculum leadership in secondary schools
4. Teacher curriculum leadership and its relationship to curriculum quality

This matter of breadth and depth is so critical that you should consult with your dissertation chair about it.

One useful way to develop the first draft of the search outline includes three simple steps: First, list all the topics that might be covered, without worrying about the order. Second, refine the list by eliminating those that seem peripheral and adding any that you might have overlooked. Finally, reorganize the refined list so the order seems clear and logical.

Suppose, for example, that you have decided to study this research problem: secondary mathematics teachers' use of the Common Core in the

extended period schedule. Here is the comprehensive list of topics you might generate in the first step:

1. Types of schedules, traditional and innovative, and the Common Core
2. Effect of time on learning and the Common Core
3. How math teachers use time in the 45-minute period and the Common Core
4. How math teachers use time in the extended period and the Common Core
5. How math teachers plan and the Common Core
6. The effects of the extended period on student learning and the Common Core
7. The types of extended periods and the Common Core
8. Student attitudes toward the extended schedule and the Common Core

Here is a refined list of topics:

1. How math teachers use time in the 45-minute schedule using the Common Core
2. How math teachers use time in the extended period using the Common Core
3. Types of extended periods and the Common Core
4. Factors affecting math teachers' use of time and the Common Core
5. Effects of extended periods on achievement in mathematics and the Common Core

This is how the final outline might appear:

- I. Factors affecting math teachers' use of time and the Common Core
- II. Types of extended periods and the Common Core

- III. Effects of extended periods on achievement in math and the Common Core
- IV. How math teachers use time in the 45-minute schedule and the Common Core
- V. How math teachers use time in the extended period and the Common Core

You can use the outline as a basis for reorganizing your files and for conducting the comprehensive critique.

Establish Parameters for the Search

In consultation with your chair, define the parameters of your search. These are the issues to resolve:

1. Type of article. Should the search focus only on empirical research, or should it also include other types, such as reports of practice and statements of opinion?
2. Language and national source. Should the search include only materials published in English? Should it include only research done in the United States, or in other nations as well?
3. What time period should the search cover? In general, searches for theses and dissertations will usually cover the period from 1990 to the present. Historical studies, of course, cover a longer period of time. The topic itself might impose some time limitations. For example, you would probably not find articles on the extended period schedule and the Common Core before the mid-2000s.
4. Should the review include theories and conceptual frameworks? The review of the literature ordinarily should include a review of theories and concepts, but your committee may feel that these need not be included in your prospectus.

Conduct a Comprehensive Search

In conducting the comprehensive critique, remember that your goal is to locate all existing sources that relate to your research problem.

Completeness is not important in the broad scan or the focused review, but it is for the comprehensive critique. The following discussion assumes that you have filed in an organized manner the results of your search of research reviews and of the ERIC database.

1. Use the Internet and commercial online services or databases. The Internet can assist you in several ways. Many dissertations are abstracted on the home page of the university where the degree was awarded. The Internet also gives you access to educational databases. Additionally, you can communicate with other researchers through online forums or discussion groups. Commercial online services provide many of these sources but impose access and use charges, while the Internet is free except for connection charges.
2. Use other computerized sources. Check with the reference librarian in your university library to determine what other computerized data sources are available. Most research libraries include the following sources on CD-ROM:
 - Dissertations Abstracts. Most dissertations will be abstracted here. You will also find information about ordering dissertations.
 - PsycLIT. As explained previously, PsycLIT is a database that includes research on topics in the field of psychology. Since many educational topics involve psychological issues, be sure to check this database. It has its own thesaurus, the Thesaurus of Psychological Index Terms. Using this to identify search descriptors will greatly simplify the search process.
 - Books in Print Plus. This database includes bibliographic information about all books still in print. You can look up your research topic in this reference.
 - Essay and General Literature Index. This source will help you locate chapters in books, although it does not comprehensively cover the field of education.
 - UnCover. This source provides the table of contents pages of nearly 17,000 journals, including most of those in the field of education; it is maintained by the Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries. It is a useful source for locating current

publications that may not yet have been entered in the ERIC database.

3. Search for current conference papers. Papers presented at the annual conferences of such organizations as the American Educational Research Association are often not entered into the ERIC database until a year or two after they were first presented. You should attend such conferences, being sure to get a conference program. If you cannot attend, order a copy of the program from the association. When you identify a paper that looks useful, write a letter such as the following to its author:

Please send me one copy of the paper on “Factors Influencing the Successful Use of Technologically-Mediated Instructional Strategies in Business Organizations,” which you presented at the 2015 conference of AERA. I could not attend your session, unfortunately. I am currently writing a dissertation on the topic and am sure that your paper will be most helpful in my own research. I would be happy to pay any charges involved.

Be sure to send a thank-you note if the author sends you a copy of the paper.

4. Read current journals. Each month you should make a regular check of journals in your field, especially those that often include research reports. Also read the newspaper *Education Week*; it usually includes timely news about research reports recently published.

Critique All Sources Retrieved

You have retrieved all the sources that seem to relate to your research problem. Now you should critique those sources to be sure that your review of the literature includes only sound research. The reader expects a critical review, not an indiscriminate collection. Although you can make some tentative judgments about research quality from an abstract, you can develop a valid critique only on the basis of a careful reading of the full text.

In undertaking that careful reading and keeping a record of the results, you should find the form shown in Exhibit 7.1 to be useful. It was

FORM FOR EVALUATING SOURCES

Form for Evaluating Sources

Authors: _____ Publication date: _____

Brief title: _____

Overall evaluation:

____ Sound in all respects

____ Generally sound, with some minor flaws

____ Seriously flawed

Research Problem: Research problem clearly stated; problem researchable.

Evaluation: _____

Comments:

Literature Review: Theory or conceptual framework presented; literature review comprehensive; literature review free of bias; studies summarized accurately and in sufficient detail; previous research synthesized, related to research reported.

Evaluation: _____

Comments:

Subjects: Clearly described; method of sampling described; selection free of bias; selection procedures appropriate; adequate number (usually at least a 60 percent response rate required for survey studies).

Evaluation: _____

Comments:

Instrumentation: Valid, with evidence for validity presented clearly; reliable, with evidence presented clearly; instruments described fully; administration procedures indicated; norms or standards specified; scores meaningful, without distortion; observers and interviewers trained and qualified.

Evaluation: _____

Comments:

Data Collection, Presentation, and Analysis: Data collection method described clearly, free of bias; data reduced appropriately; data

presented clearly; data analysis clearly explained, supported by data presented.

Evaluation: _____

Comments:

Summary and Discussion: Summary accurate, sufficiently detailed, without distortion; findings interpreted appropriately; conclusions warranted by findings; interpretations clearly identified as such.

Evaluation: _____

Comments:

Criteria Specific to Research Type

EXPERIMENTAL AND QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL: Hypothesis clearly stated; direct manipulation of independent variable; design clearly explicated; extraneous variables controlled.

CAUSAL-COMPARATIVE: Causal condition previously occurred; extraneous variables controlled; differences between groups controlled; causal conclusions warranted.

CORRELATIONAL: Causation not inferred; size of correlation sufficient for use of results (group predictions require .40–.60; individual, .75).

DESCRIPTIVE: Conclusions about relationships not made; graphic representations accurate without distortion.

EVALUATION: Evaluation model identified; client and stakeholders specified; criteria specified; sources for criteria explained; standards clearly explicated, justified; evaluations rendered, supported with specific data.

CASE STUDY: Researcher's role identified; possible bias acknowledged, controlled; descriptions differentiated from interpretations; multiple methods of data collection and sources used; study of sufficient duration.

ACTION RESEARCH: Researcher's role identified; bias acknowledged; actions clearly described; actions evaluated, with adequate evaluation data provided; multiple perspectives and data sources used.

Evaluation on type-specific criteria: _____

Comments:

Exhibit 7.1

developed by reviewing several texts in research methods (McMillan, 2012, was especially helpful). Notice that it first lists criteria that apply to most research and then notes those criteria specific to a given type. Complete the form, and then attach it to your copy of the source.

This careful critique of the research will enable you to make some important decisions as you prepare to write the literature review. What is the overall quality of the research on this topic? Which studies should receive major attention? Which studies are so flawed that they should be ignored? Which issues require further study?

Conducting a comprehensive critique will be an ongoing process throughout the dissertation project. Though time-consuming, it is an essential step that should not be hurried. Your goal is to know everything published so far on your research problem and to know which sources satisfy appropriate criteria. The knowledge you gain will help you write a sound prospectus, write a quality literature chapter, and develop your own professional knowledge.