

Assessing and summarizing research



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Methods of looking at literature

- Scanning or looking through the literature
 - To know what has been already been done in your area (or subject) of interest
 - To strengthen your arguments or substantiate your point of view
 - To learn about opposing view points
- Systematic Review of the literature
 - To understand what works best
 - To provide an exhaustive summary of literature relevant to a research question
 - To find gaps in the literature to identify future areas of research

Before you start...

- Get organised!
 - Think of a tool that will make the process of summarising easier
- Tools depend on depth of your analysis
 - For a quick scan (e.g)
 - Excel
 - Mendeley
 - For a more detailed assessment (e.g)
 - nVivo
 - refworks

Before you start... contd

- If you are working in teams, split the work among your group members by sources rather than by keywords
- Be clear about why you are reviewing the literature and how much resources you have

Assessing research for a quick scan

- Particularly for online sources
 - Anyone can publish on the web on blogs, personal websites etc.
- Use the checklist below to make sure you verify your online sources
 - Credibility
 - Accuracy
 - Reasonableness
 - Support

Online sources contd...

- **Credibility:** What are the author's qualifications for writing on the subject?
 - Look for information about the author's credentials.
 - Are there any ratings or reviews for the website?
- **Accuracy:** Is the information you find current, complete, and correct
 - Check when the information was updated. If the information is old or there is no date, be careful of using the information unless you can verify it with another source.
 - Does the information on the site have contradictions?

Online sources contd...

- Reasonableness: Does it present a balanced and consistent argument?
 - Be aware that not all authors and organizations are neutral. You may come across Web sites that present slanted and one-sided arguments.
- Support: Where does the information come from? Does the information contain sources?
 - A lack of supporting information should warn you that the information on the website may be inaccurate.

For a more detailed review

- Study methodologies have to be assessed to ascertain if they have been followed properly
- Some types of study design you may come across include
 - Experimental design or RCTs
 - Quasi-experimental designs
 - Time series or panel data studies
 - Cross-sectional
 - Natural experiments
 - Case studies
 - Ethnographies

Criteria for assessment depends on the methodology...

- Experimental design or RCT – has a control group
- Quasi-experimental designs – has a comparison group
 - Were the mechanism of assignment for control or comparison groups adequate
 - Were there any spill-overs or contamination
 - Were the data collection methods used adequate

Assessments of methods contd...

- Time series or panel data studies
- Cross-sectional
 - Is there sampling bias for cross sectional or panel studies
 - How representative is the survey and what population is represented
 - Are the statistical techniques used to analyse the data properly conducted?

Assessments of methods contd...

- Case studies
 - How detailed is the case study
 - Have the key people been approached during the study
- Ethnographies
 - Time spent
 - Rigour of the study design
 - Detailed description of the data collection process

Quality contd...

- Are the conclusions reached in the study supported by evidence within the paper?
- Anyone can publish on the web on blogs, personal websites etc.
 - Credibility
 - Accuracy
 - Reasonableness
 - Support

For synthesis

- List out the aspects you would like to look at as per the objectives of your lit review
 - Actors
 - Outcomes
 - Etc
- Group the studies that you have found by
 - Study design - if you are looking at a primary study
 - Geographical areas/countries/economic regions
- Might need to go one step lower and do a subgroup analysis

Synthesis contd...

- For a more systematic review of literature
 - Meta Analysis (Quantitative methods)
 - Narrative (or meta) synthesis (Quantitative, Qualitative, mixed methods)
- The summary should be easily understood
 - Tables help
 - If you are doing graphs, make sure that you are not comparing apples and oranges

Use what is already done by others

- Existing sources
 - Literature reviews
 - Review papers
 - Systematic reviews
 - Evidence Briefs
- Can be found in
 - 3ie
 - DFID
 - World Bank