RESEARCH GUIDELINES

REVIEWING THE EXISTING LITERATURE

WHY MASTER THIS SKILL?

Reviewing what's already out there – also known as doing a 'literature review' – is the best way to start any research project. It avoids repeating what others have already done, saving time and money (and embarrassment). It will help you to clarify and justify the focus of your planned research. And it will show that you know the context on this issue, giving credibility and authority to your work.

If you are going to hire researchers, conducting an initial literature review will ensure that you are paying them to generate new information, and will help you to engage with them on the topic, so improving its quality (see also our guideline on Writing Terms of Reference for Research).

SUGGESTIONS FOR HOW TO DO IT

The way you approach a literature review will depend on its purpose. Are you researching a new topic or aiming to fill in gaps in knowledge? Or do you only need an initial review to help guide the work of a researcher who will do more? Once you have a good sense of how extensive your review needs to be, here are some tips on how to begin.

1. Unpacking your topic

Break your research topic down into smaller parts and sub-themes, perhaps by brainstorming about it with others. What are the key words to focus your search? (You could try drawing a mind map to clarify this – see resources at the end of these guidelines). You will probably come up with too many sub-themes – you can't look into them all. Which ones are top priorities? Once you have identified the major sub-themes, think about the kind of information you could gather on each one that would shed light on your research topic.

2. Searching for sources

Ask informed individuals. Think of two or three people who really know the subject, and ask them for their top five recommendations of what you should read to understand the debate. Most people will be very happy to share their reading suggestions.

Use the Internet. Using a search engine, such as Google or DuckDuckGo, may produce some interesting and unexpected documents, but they will come up in no particular order of importance. Try to search intelligently, for instance by using quotation marks to enclose phrases that you are searching for. More focused tools are also available, including:

• Google Scholar, which searches through academic journal articles and books.
• ELDIS – a 'development studies gateway' created by The Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. It is an excellent starting point, covering the key literature for a wide range of issues, and will lead you to many other websites.

- **The** British Library **Catalogue** is a quick way to search for books on your topic (but it will not tell you much about their contents).
- Google News **and** BBC News can be searched for the latest news on your topic.

Search Oxfam's resources

Oxfam's Policy and Practice website has a huge database of Oxfam publications (including policy papers, research reports and programme learning), as well as contact details for Oxfam advisors, blogs, useful links, and many other resources.

If you do not have access to the internet or connectivity is poor, the same principles apply: identify and ask informed individuals; get access to the most relevant documents via your contacts, academia, libraries etc.; and look through the list of sources or bibliography in each.

Use INASP and Research4Life

INASP, in collaboration with national library consortia, provide access to over 75,000 online journals and books from 50 publishers, in full text, free at the point of use in 22 countries across sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America. Access is managed by your library/institution which pays for access where relevant, often by joining INASP's in-country partner consortium, and registers your institution for access. To see what is available in your country, visit your country page at http://www.inasp.info/ .

Research4Life is the collective name for four programmes, AGORA (agriculture), Hinari (medicine and health) OARE (environmental science) and ARDI (technology and innovation). These programmes, available in more than 100 countries, provide online access to thousands of peer-reviewed international scientific journals, books,and databases. Access is managed by your library/institution which pays for access where relevant and registers your institution for access.

3. Reading documents critically

It may help to imagine that your task is to explain to your colleagues 'the state of the debate' on your research topic. Who are the main players in the debate and what are the main areas of dispute? What evidence is there on either side? What are the unanswered questions? What will be added to the debate by answering your research questions?

The literature will contain documents with many different views on your topic, with authors writing from many different perspectives and with different ideas about what should be done. In order to help yourself critically assess what you are reading, ask yourself a series of questions as you read:

Where is this document coming from?

Report writers sometimes present their findings as 'objective' or neutral, as if they have merely been gathering the facts. But most social and development research – including that done by Oxfam – is motivated by the values of the individuals or institutions concerned. These values shape the questions they ask, the methods they use, and the way they report their findings. It is important to understand the underlying politics of a piece of research. As you read, ask yourself:

- Who funded this research and what are their values or aims?
- Is the author an academic, an NGO or think tank researcher, a government employee, a consultant? How will this affect their approach?
- What are the author's sources in the bibliography? (This may reveal their leanings.)

- What concepts and language do they use, and what does that reveal about their politics? If they have made any policy recommendations, what do these reveal?

What is the quality of this document?

How authoritative are its findings? Ask yourself:

- Are the key concepts clearly and critically defined?
- Does the author provide a strong review of the existing literature before proceeding with their own enquiry?
- Does the researcher show critical self-awareness of their own position and role in relation to the research?
- Is the research conducted and reported in ways that show the author is aware of gender and diversity dimensions of this topic?
- What research methods are used to produce the results? Do they seem appropriate for answering the questions asked?
- What is not being said? What issues do you feel are left hanging?
- Do the research findings actually answer the question asked at the outset?
- Were the findings inevitable, given the assumptions underlying the research?

Reading in light of your research questions

If you are doing a literature review, you can rapidly feel that you are drowning in a sea of information.

- Keep coming back to your research questions and focus your reading on its relevance to them.
- Don't set out to read every document cover-to-cover: start by skimming, getting a sense of the overall argument, then hone in on the most relevant sections.
- If you come across documents that contradict your view, don't ignore them! Bring them into your review as a way of showing what the debate is. Understanding opposing findings and views will help you sharpen your questions.

Keep systematized references of all the relevant documents that you read. You will need these references to write up your research, so save yourself time by documenting the references as you come across them (many researchers lose valuable days of writing up because they have to hunt down references that they saw but didn't record properly several months back…).

4. Writing up your findings

As you write up your literature overview:

- Start the review by setting out your research questions: these will clarify the purpose of the review and will provide a focus for what you write up.
- Aim to present an overview of the state of the debate. If it is relevant, set out the two or three major positions taken, explaining to the reader who are the different actors holding these views. Use the diversity of views to bring the issue alive.

5. Revising your research agenda based on what you have learned

- Present the major messages of your literature review to colleagues who are also involved or interested in the research topic.
- Share and discuss the implications of these findings for the research questions. Do the findings of the literature review:

- Directly answer some of your research questions?
- Encourage you to define your concepts more clearly?
- Encourage you to reframe your research questions?
- Prompt you to question your assumptions and the purpose of the research?

If you are hiring researchers, present your literature review to them at the outset, together with the Terms of Reference for the research project. The review will set the project off to a good and speedy start because:

- It means you won't be paying them to repeat what you and others have already done.
- It shows that you are already knowledgeable on the subject and so will be able to assess the quality and contribution of the work that they produce.

WHAT MIGHT GO WRONG?

You don't have the time to do the literature review

Can you make the time? Even spending two days reading the major pieces of research will greatly improve your background knowledge of the topic. If you are commissioning researchers, you could be spending a lot of money on it, so if you can create a small amount of time now, it could significantly improve the relevance of the research that they produce, and hence their value for money. (The other good reason for doing it yourself is that you get to learn about current debates in development!). If you simply cannot make the time, don't just leave it to the researchers you plan to hire: the review is needed to shape and sharpen their Terms of Reference. Can you delegate the review to a colleague? Or could you recruit an assistant to do it? They would need your support and oversight, but it is worth it.

You can't access the most important information or reports

If you identify journal articles or reports which should be included in your literature review but can't find them, ask colleagues and other researchers for help. It may be possible for them to access the full text of some online journals. It's also often worth writing directly to the author(s) of an article or report and requesting an electronic copy or reprint. You could also search their institutional repository, if it is open (see links to directories and lists of institutional repositories at http://www.inasp.info/en/training-resources/open-access-resources/institutional-repositories/). A good starting point is the Directory of Open Access Repositories – OpenDOAR. OpenDOAR is an authoritative directory of academic open access repositories. http://www.opendoar.org/.

You can tell the research is politicized but can't decipher it

Do you know, or could you find, someone working on these issues who would have a higher level of understanding? Read the major sources first, then ask them to give you a quick overview of who's who. Remember, of course, they are also likely to be part of the debate and so will have their own bias in presenting it.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

All links last accessed June 2016.

Books: See Chapter 5 of *Research for Development: A Practical Guide* by Sophie Laws, Caroline Harper, Nicola Jones and Rachel Marcus (London: Sage Publications, 2013).

Internet sources include good advice given to university students such as at University of Toronto, Canada: http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/specific-types-of-writing/literature-review.

On creating mind maps: http://www.mind-mapping.co.uk.

Rapid literature reviews: There is a growing canon of literature on different techniques for assessing and presenting evidence including writing rapid literature reviews. For a UK government perspective see: http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140305122816/http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/networks/gsr/resources-and-guidance/rapid-evidence-assessment.

INASP Help Documentation: Series of help documents for accessing and using online research literature developed by INASP: http://www.inasp.info/en/training-resources/e-resources/access-support/series-help-documents-access-and-use-online-research-literature/.

INASP list of Open Access resources: http://www.inasp.info/en/training-resources/open-access-resources.

Research4Life's 'How to Read a Scientific Paper': http://www.research4life.org/training/authorship-skills-2/, or more specifically Research4Life training materials http://www.research4life.org/training/.

LINKS

Google: https://www.google.co.uk/

DuckDuckGo: https://duckduckgo.com/

Google Scholar: https://scholar.google.co.uk/

Eldis: http://www.eldis.org/

The British Library Catalogue: http://www.bl.uk/

Google News: https://news.google.com/

BBC News: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news

Policy and Practice: http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/

INASP: http://www.inasp.info/en/

Reasearch4Life: http://www.research4life.org/

AGORA: http://www.fao.org/agora/en/

Hinari: http://www.who.int/hinari/en/

OARE: http://www.unep.org/oare/

ARDI: http://www.wipo.int/ardi/en/