Extract from

Constructing a Good Dissertation

A Practical Guide to Finishing a Master's, MBA or PhD on Schedule

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A man who reviews the old so as to find out the new is qualified to teach others.
– Confucius

CHAPTER 1
THE LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review always comes after the introduction and before the method chapter. This makes sense: In the introduction, you've told your reader what you're going to do and you've intrigued them enough to read on. Now it's time to locate them solidly in the secondary literature. The 'secondary literature' is the body of works previously published by other scholars. You need to identify and review those relevant to your work.

A good literature review is comprehensive, critical and contextualised. That means that it will provide the reader with a theory base, a survey of published works that pertain to your investigation, and an analysis of that work. It is a critical, factual overview of what has gone before. The literature review is *not* the place to present research data of your own (unless it has been previously published, that is). It contains secondary sources only.

THE PURPOSE OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review serves several purposes in your dissertation. A good literature review shows

- that you are aware of what is going on in the field, and thus your credentials
- that there is a theory base for the work you are proposing to do
- how your work fits in with what has already been done (it provides a detailed context for your work)
- that your work has significance
- that your work will lead to new knowledge.

Let's take them one by one.

Your Credentials

Readers will not take either you or your work terribly seriously unless you manage to convince them that you are well read in whatever it is that you are investigating. 'Well read', by the way, means that you have read broadly in your field *and* that you understand the important works in depth. If your literature review is any good, there

won't be much room left for doubt on either point. By your selection of works, organising them in a way that makes sense, discussing them objectively, and focussing on the important bits, you will have established your credentials.

Theory Base

This is a part of the literature review that poses a major problem for many students. In it, you need to show that you understand and can relate your work to the major theories that underpin what you are going to do.

> To understand what a theory base is, one needs to understand what the word 'theory' means in academic terms. In popular terms, the word implies fuzziness, guesswork and unreliability. In academic terms, a 'theory' is a logical explanation for why something is as it is or does as it does. Theories are not cast in stone – something may come along and disprove them tomorrow – but they are the best explanations we currently have. The more general a theory is – i.e. the more it explains without the facts contradicting it – the better a theory it is.
>
> In the exact sciences, theories are often testable and have predictive power. In the social sciences and humanities, this is not as often the case, but they are still logical interpretations and explanations that help us make sense of the world around us.

Look at it this way: If you were developing a new product, paint perhaps, you wouldn't just throw a lot of ingredients together. If you randomly combined sand, bolts, tonic water, flour and paper, you would make a mess, not paint. If, on the other hand, you understood the theory behind what makes paint, you would probably use the key ingredients that the theory predicts would make paint. You would know what they are and why they work. You might add some new ingredients or combine old ones in a new way, but your work would be based on theory. It would have a theory base. On the basis of theory you would be able to explain, before you even made your new paint, why it would be likely to work.

The same thing applies to all academic work. For example, it is one thing to devise a new system to teach children to read at an early age; it is another to prove that it works. Assuming that it does work, an explanation of why it works is the theory behind it. There will be certain principles that cause it to work. Naming those will be the basis of the theory. The theory might ultimately be wrong, right, or partially right, but until contradicted by facts it is a possible explanation.

If something has no theory base whatsoever – for example, using the density of traffic in the morning to predict the yield of next year's maize crop – it's unlikely to produce interesting or valid results. If no one has thought of any reasonable explanations for why something might work and you can't either, it probably won't work. A theory base is necessary for readers to take your work seriously.

It is possible, even likely, that there will be several conflicting theories about why something is the way it is. For example, there are several competing theories

accounting for the different roles men and women have played in society, ranging from purely cultural theories to genetic ones, with many variations and spin-offs.

If you are required to include a theory base in your dissertation, you need to hunt down the major explanatory theories that pertain to what you are doing and comment on them as they relate to your work. *Do* consult with your supervisor when doing this part of the literature review – he or she will know the theories and the main players.

Context

What you need to do here is to locate your work in the work of others. It must be clear to the reader how what you are proposing to do fits in with what has gone before. By discussing the works related to what you're going to do and focussing on the ones most closely related, the context of your work will automatically be clear. This one is closely related to the next point, significance.

Significance

After reading your literature review, there should be little doubt in readers' minds that your work has some significance. You will have gone quite some way towards making the case in your introduction but, by grounding your proposed work in the previous literature, you will *show* the significance of your work.

If you structure your literature review according to the funnel method described below, the significance of your work will emerge automatically.

> If you want to emphasise the significance and originality of your work, when you review the work of other scholars, gently point out, where you can, omissions or inadequacies in their work as it relates to *what is original* in your work. Don't do this too often or too blatantly. If you do, it will become transparent and irritating. But you certainly can put in a few well-placed remarks to the effect that "while contributing in this and that regard, unfortunately So-and-so's work does not address [your originality]" or "So-and-so's major contribution was this, that and the other. However, he fails to consider his point in the South African environment" [while you do].

Originality

If you have reviewed the related work of other scholars and you have not found anything that precisely duplicates what you are going to do, then your work must be original – if your literature review has been at all comprehensive, that is. This, incidentally, is one of the reasons why it is so important that your literature review focuses on the most *closely related* and most *current* work. It's how you show that what you are planning to do hasn't already been overtaken by work already published.

There are exceptions to the originality requirement. For example, if you are precisely duplicating the work of someone else in order to check its validity, obviously there's not much room for originality. Your originality then lies in your

thesis statement only: You will hypothesise that the work either can or cannot be replicated. Similarly, a meta-study also leaves little room for originality.

STRUCTURING THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Given the number of works that literature reviews can contain and the importance of balance having a good structure for your literature review is vital. The funnel method will bring order to your literature review. It will also make it much easier to write because it provides you with a built-in structure.

> The 'funnel method' of structuring a literature review as shown in Figure 2-1 below is designed to make sure that all the objectives of the literature review are met automatically. Applied properly, your credentials and originality, as well as the theory base, context and significance of your work will all emerge without further effort on your part.

Categorising Works

The first rule of the funnel method is to group works by commonality. This applies regardless of topic or thesis statement. It does not matter if you include articles, books or any other type of secondary sources in a group: If they have something in common, they should be grouped together.

There is no formula for what commonalities you should choose, or into how many groups you separate the works. Whatever seems to you to link works together is what you should choose. They could be linked by the focus of works or by how they relate to major facets of your work. Whatever substantial similarities you find are potential groups. One of the groups should, however, should be 'Theory Base'.

> Be sure to use your index cards when grouping the works. If you have followed the advice in Index Cards, you should have at least one index card (and probably more) with comments written on it for every work that you are going to include in your literature review. These cards are invaluable when it comes to helping you group works and for structuring the actual discussion of each group.

To group the works to be reviewed, first read through all your index cards labelled Literature Review. As you read, keep an eye open for possible categories in which to group works. As you spot possible categories, think of a name for the category and write that on a separate index card (preferably a different colour). The closer the name you give to the category relates to whatever it is that links the works, the better.

By the time you've gone through all your literature review cards, you should have a fair number of possible categories. Go through them one more time, just to be sure that there are no duplications of categories (if so, combine them) and to be sure that you haven't missed a possible category. If new possible categories occur to you as you

do this, give them a name and write that on a separate index card too. Then make a list of those possible categories.

Go over the list of possible categories, checking for logic and completeness, making the necessary changes as you do. Then go through all the literature review index cards again, this time sorting them into their categories. If there are some cards left over that don't seem to fit into any category, read them carefully. If you made a card for the work, and labelled it Literature Review, you must have thought that something about that work was worth including in your literature review. Name what that 'something' was and, if you have a category to which it relates, put it in that category. If you don't have a category where it fits, then make a new category.

- Sometimes you may find that a particular work belongs in more than one category. In that case, you need to find the dominant category and that's where you should place it. If you *really* can't choose one category over another, only then make a copy of the index card and put it in both category piles. Try to avoid this as much as possible, because it will lead to your discussing the same work (albeit different aspects of it) more than once in your literature review.

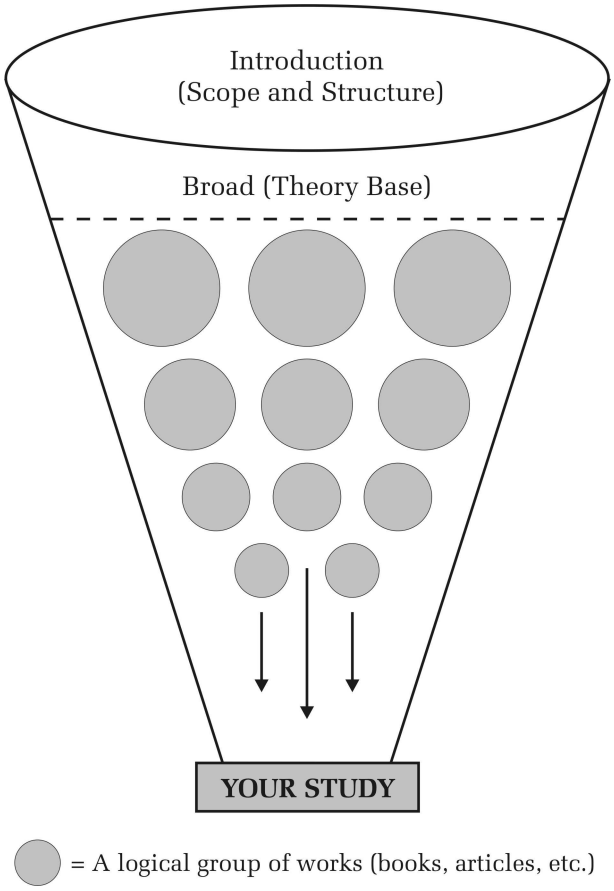
You should now have all the works that you want to include in your literature review in at least one category. You will have several distinct piles, all with several works in them. Some may contain many cards, others only a few. That's okay. The important thing at this stage is that you have brought some form of order to all the works you need to include in your review.

Once you've completed this part – and it may take several iterations till you are satisfied – you have the basis to structure your literature review. Your next step is to place the categories in a logical order. The order should be as shown in the drawing of the funnel below. The categories – your stacks of index cards – are the balls in the funnel.

Ordering Categories

The first category you need to deal with contains the works that provide a theory base for your work. They come first in the literature review because they give the reader the big picture. The internal order of the theory base category should reflect the major theories that pertain to your work. You should group the cards in this pile according to which theory the works are the closest to. Start the discussion of each theory with the classic works about that theory. Then comment on later works that either extended or argued against that theory, before moving on to the next theory.

Figure 2-1. The funnel method of structuring a literature review



The balls in the top of the funnel are categories of works that are relevant to your investigation, but do not specifically address what you are doing. They will have more to do with your topic than with your thesis statement. They will tend to contain a lot of works per category, which makes sense because there will be more works that are generally relevant than there will be works that are specifically related to what you are doing. You should discuss generally relevant works briefly, concentrating on the aspects most relevant to your work. The better or more helpful to you any of these works are, the more you should comment on them. But don't go into too much detail. Keep it short.

The next layer of works will be works that are closer to what you are doing, but still do not match directly. There will be fewer works per category, but you should deal with them in a bit more detail, as they relate more closely to (an aspect of) your work.

As you move down in your literature review funnel, the categories should get closer and closer to the research that you are going to undertake. Eventually you may find that a category contains only two or three, or possibly even one work. And that's okay, because it is directly relevant to what you are investigating. You may spend several paragraphs reviewing just one article when you get to the bottom of your literature review: It is important to what you are going to do, so it makes sense to discuss it in detail.

If you pay attention to your paragraph introductions and conclusions, you will guide the reader seamlessly from one group of works to the next. The whole will read as a unit, conceptualised as such from the outset.

The Internal Order of Categories

Internally, your categories should also have an order. The fact that the works are in the same category is your point of departure. They must have something that links them or else they wouldn't be in the same pile, so that's the first point of discussion: the thread that runs through that category. After that, you can discuss the works chronologically, or play them off against each other, commenting on their strengths and weaknesses as they pertain to each other, or you can subdivide them into groups. You have a lot of choices here, and it is a good idea to vary the internal structure of each of the categories a little. Doing so makes the review more pleasant to read. It also shows that you have actively thought about the works and that you understand them.

> However you choose to order the works within any category, it is a good idea to organise your index cards in that order before you start writing. It is also a good idea to write a linking sentence or two on each card. That way, when you get to the actual writing, it becomes a matter of flipping index cards. When you have worked your way from the top of the pile to the bottom, you're done with that category, and ready for the next.

When you are faced with actually writing about the works, however you organise the internal order of the categories, you will include quotes from some of the works. The same rule that applies to all direct quotations applies here too: Use them sparingly. Make sure direct quotations capture a key point that the author makes, otherwise rather paraphrase. Needless to say, all the works that you discuss must be fully referenced, regardless of whether you quote them directly or not.

The last thing you should do for your literature review is write its introduction. You should do it last because, in it, you comment on the scope of your literature review, and on how you structured the review. Both are a *lot* easier to do once you have actually written it, and you'll be sure that what you say in the introduction actually matches what comes below it. And that's important because, as with all introductions, this is where you make promises and create expectations.

When you introduce the scope of your review, you need to comment on what you have included and why, as well as on why you decided to draw the line there. In other words, you name the categories that you included, and then you point out the

sense in limiting your review to those categories. When discussing how you structured the review, you should briefly discuss the order of the categories, and the sense of putting them in that order. That way your readers will already have an idea of what they're going into so, when they get to the actual review, the order and the logic of the whole will make sense to them.

Concluding the Literature Review

When you reach the bottom of the funnel all that remains is to conclude your literature review with a succinct summary of the state of the scholarship as it pertains to your thesis, and a comment about the usefulness of your work in that context. You explain that, in the light of the above, your study will do – whatever it is that is original in your work. That may be the problem that it tackles (your thesis statement), how you go about it (your method), or the sources that you use. If it is more than one of them, point that out.

You will have – automatically – done what every good literature review should do: You will have established your credentials by identifying, grouping and commenting on the works as you did. You will have demonstrated your understanding of what's going on in your field the same way. You will have provided a theory base for your study before discussing the works that pertain more closely to your topic and thesis statement. You will also have demonstrated the originality and significance of your work, and where it fits in with what has gone before. If your work were not original in some way, it would have shown up in your literature review, probably somewhere towards the bottom. If it were not significant to some degree, you would not have found any works that relate to what you're going to do. And by structuring the literature review in the way you did, saving the works that relate most closely till last, you have shown the reader exactly where your work fits in with what has been done before.

When you structure your literature review this way, you may notice that a rough chronological order emerges by itself. Academic work builds on what has gone before – what you're doing is the latest in a long trail of work by other scholars. In the funnel structure, that shows up automatically.

BALANCE

The works you include, how you group them, and how you relate them to each other will say a lot about your understanding of your field and topic. It is up to you to balance works, determined always by the need to contextualise your work and to demonstrate your ability to evaluate the works you include. 'To balance' means to select the appropriate quantity and quality of works on every relevant facet of your topic, and that the amount of space you devote to discussing each facet and work is appropriate.

- Stay away from too many general works, especially textbooks. General works usually won't contain the level of detail that you need. Don't underestimate the amount of specifically relevant works likely to be available. Be especially careful

of tertiary sources: Rather identify the relevant bits and go to the secondary sources on which they are based.

You do not need to review all works in equal detail. Some may warrant only a single sentence; others, several paragraphs. When works are only loosely related to your study, but are relevant to your topic, you may deal with a whole class of works in a short paragraph. The more important a work is to your work, the more space you should devote to it. As a rough rule of thumb, length = importance.

You should also spend less time on works that comment on essentially the same subject: An overview of the current state of the subject and a few lines per work detailing what is original in each is sufficient to let the reader know both the ideas in that particular area and your mastery of them.

Works that relate closely to your investigation will require a more in-depth discussion. If only a part of a work is relevant to your dissertation, then that is what your review should focus on. If the entire work is relevant, then of course you need to discuss it in its entirety.

SELECTING WORKS TO INCLUDE

A frequently asked question is how many works should be included in a literature review. There is no absolute answer to that one. A doctoral dissertation nearly always has more works in the literature review than a master's in the same field does, but PhD projects nearly always tackle broader questions. Use your institutional guidelines as just that – a guideline. Your literature review must be comprehensive, but what has been previously published is not up to you. Your literature review must reflect the reality of what is available and relevant. In other words, it must provide an accurate reflection of the current state of the scholarship in the area that you are writing about.

Don't pad your literature review if there simply is not a lot available, but search carefully. Most often you will find that if you do your secondary research properly you will soon have too much rather than too little. And then you will have the luxury of choosing the best and most relevant to review.

> You do *not* need to get hold of and review every book or article that could possibly pertain to what you are investigating, which is an impossibility anyway. You *do* need to identify the seminal theoretical works and those works that are directly related to your work. Quality is *far* more important than quantity.

If you're wondering whether or not to include any given work, look at your thesis statement again. Ask yourself how the work relates to it. What's the contribution? How important is that contribution? Based on the answer, make a decision. If you include a work, it should contribute something important to either the theory base underpinning your work or to (a facet of) your thesis.

Adding Works

If you organise your literature review according to the structure explained above, you will always be able to add new works as and when you find them, and you will be able to slot them in without upsetting the organisation of your literature review. Either you will be able to put them in one of the categories or, in the unlikely event that they do not fit any category, you will know where to slot in a new category.

- If you come across a work that you feel needs to be included, by all means do so, but don't add so many that you drown. You are done when you have reviewed the major theoretical works and both the well- and lesser-known works that pertain *directly* to what you are doing. There will always be more peripherally relevant works. Unless you draw the line somewhere, your literature review is going to become a never-ending story. Only include new works after the proposal stage if they really are important and you missed them in the secondary research that you did for the proposal.

If there really is too much work that is directly relevant, you probably have a problem with your thesis statement. Either it is too broad or general, or you don't have an original angle. That means it needs work – but that you should have found out while doing your preliminary research. If you didn't, well, it needs fixing now. It is much better to deal with it now, while working on your literature review, than when doing your primary research, or worse yet, when writing the dissertation.

CONCLUSION

A literature review is an important part of a dissertation. It takes a lot of work to write a good one. It is often the most time-consuming piece of a dissertation to research and write. But it is worth doing well. You'll learn a lot and you'll get many ideas that will be useful elsewhere in your dissertation.

There is a strong correlation between the quality of a literature review and the quality of the dissertation that it finds itself in. Good examiners, by the way, know that. It makes sense: If you have done good secondary research, you will have all the building blocks at your disposal that other scholars can provide. If you are able to provide a sensible, balanced discussion of that literature, then you must, per definition, understand that work. That means you understand your field. It is highly unlikely, if you both understand your field and have the relevant and latest thinking at your disposal, that your work is going to be of substandard quality. Hence the correlation.

Academic Reading

Secondary literature, regardless of topic, tends to be extensive and time is not on your side when it comes to reading it. Unless you plan and focus, secondary research can easily expand to fill all the time you allocated to your dissertation. You have to be able to get through large amounts of potentially useful material quickly in order to get what you need for your project.

A fair amount of theory has been written about reading effectively for research purposes, but what the best of it boils down to is this:

- Academic reading is done for a purpose. You need to name that purpose before you start.
- Skim each work to find out whether it is worth reading, or contains bits that are worth reading, according to your purpose. Once you find what you need,
  - make sure you understand the information, and then
  - extract what you need (make notes).

HAVING A PURPOSE

Academic reading is not done to pleasantly pass the hours on a Sunday afternoon. It's goal-orientated, done to satisfy a predefined need. You want something from the secondary literature and you should name what that is *before* you start reading.

You will probably want several things at various stages in your secondary research. Initially you may want to get a general impression of what is currently being published in a certain field or specialisation. Later you may want theoretical perspectives on a certain subject, a guide to a certain research design, or studies that are closely related to what you're considering doing.

Whatever the case, always spend some time figuring out why you need to go to the library before you go. If you can name what you need, you can formulate a plan of action to get it. What you want must, of course, always be defined in terms of your dissertation project's needs.

> If whatever you're researching is new to you, ask your librarian or supervisor for a text that synthesises the literature in that area. Articles and books that explore the current state of a field or topic, review articles, and introductions to conference proceedings can be very helpful. A good synthesis will give an overview of the currents and debates in a field or topic area and discuss the major works and players. Using that as a guideline is quick, creates understanding and leads you to where *you* need to go. To put it differently, first read *about* the works that you are considering reading.

Once the preliminary reading is done, look for details on the items that you have defined as relevant and for new perspectives on what you already know. That's the most efficient way to get an in-depth understanding of your topic. Start with the latest

works – they'll help you get an overview of what has come before. They'll also often contain more relevant information than older works, their bibliographies are more useful, and you will be relying on them more in your dissertation.

Often you won't be able to get hold of everything that you want. Libraries have limited budgets and they invariably fall short of pleasing everyone. Weigh the effort involved in getting something against its importance to your project. Here, as elsewhere, it's a balancing act. If you *must* have it, get it; if it would be nice, think how nice and whether there are alternatives.

When considering alternatives, think out of the box. If a work really is important to you, you can probably devise a number of strategies to get it. The interlibrary loan system works well. Your supervisor has a personal library, and so does virtually every other academic/expert interested in your topic. Amazon.com has or can get hold of virtually any book under the sun. All it takes is a credit card and the finances to cover it. Nearly all major journals have an online presence. If they don't have the article you're looking for online, they probably do have the editor's email address. The author of the article also has an email address. Try both. But think also how you could get the core of what you need in a different form. Frequently, later works by authors rely to some degree on what they wrote before, and what is in a book has often been tested in stages in articles. Ask around and see what you can find.

SKIMMING

Efficiency is important. There are a lot of works out there. Some will be relevant in full, but most will have only bits and pieces relevant to your purpose. Resist the temptation to read everything in equal detail. Only if an entire work is important should you give all of it your full attention. Mine a work for the information you need and then move to the next richest vein. If you feel tempted to become perfectionistic (and many postgraduate students do), this can be difficult but you just don't have the time to read it all in detail. Vet:

- **books** by the table of contents, bibliography, introduction and the first and last few paragraphs in chapters,
- **articles and dissertations** by the abstract, the introduction, conclusion and bibliography,
- **online sources** by the organisation or individual responsible for publishing the material, by the abstract if present and, for the rest, by skimming, concentrating on keywords and concepts.

Skimming according to keywords is a powerful technique. Make a list of keywords relating to what you're interested in, and first look them up in the index of the work you're considering reading. Then go to those pages and see whether there is anything worth your time. If the work doesn't have an index, keep your keywords in mind while you page through it. You'll miss a lot but, if there is something that is relevant, you should be able to pick it up. When you find something interesting, slow down and read in more detail. If it doesn't make sense because you've missed the context, page back and read that.

An alternate way of skimming is to concentrate on the first sentence in paragraphs. Good writing has topic sentences that tell the reader what the paragraph is going to be about, and they belong at the beginning of every paragraph.

Another effective technique is to first look for the main point or argument of a work and only then concentrate on the details. Use the table of contents, the introduction, and the last few paragraphs per chapter for this one. Once you can name the main argument of a work – the thesis underlying it – you will be in a much better position to gauge its relevance, as well as to understand and evaluate it.

Understanding What You Read

When you read, you will be trying to increase your understanding of your subject through the use of the work of others. Unfortunately though, not everything that has been written is of equal quality. When it comes to detailed reading, you need to become a critical consumer.

You can only be a critical consumer if you truly understand the point that the authors are trying to make and then look at the quality of their evidence and arguments. You don't want to risk misrepresenting the works or authors in your dissertation. You must evaluate the quality of what you read, as well as its applicability to your work.

When you read a work (or points in a work) that you need to understand in detail, try to be as objective as possible: Approach the piece with a neutral mind, read, and try hard to understand it from the author's perspective. Only once you have done that, can you formulate a judgement on what you have read. It is especially important to do this whenever you have preconceived ideas (positive or negative) about a work or an author. To put it differently, be aware of your biases!

If something is very important to your work, discuss it with others. You'll learn a lot if you can find some other people, maybe your supervisor or colleagues, to discuss key works with. 🕸 Using an online study group can be useful. Academics (and dissertation writers) specialise, so you may find it difficult to find people who share your exact interests in your immediate surroundings – but they're out there.

Recording What You Find

The book or article you found today will be lost tomorrow unless you record (at least) its author and title. What you learned and understood today will be forgotten tomorrow unless you write it down. When you come across information that is (potentially) useful to your dissertation, you *must* make a note of it. If you don't, expect to spend a lot of time bouncing up and down to the library. Expect also to end up with a much weaker dissertation. The system described in Index Cards works very well. Learn it, apply it consistently, and your life will get much easier.

Taking notes is one thing. Taking them efficiently is another. The fewer times you need to return to any given work, the more efficiently you have gone about your research. Make copies, and apply the 'use to lose' principle from Research Basics.

WHAT YOU SHOULD BE READING

What you should be reading obviously depends on your topic and thesis statement, but the bulk of it should be scholarly books, articles, dissertations and conference proceedings. Popular sources (magazines, newspapers and the like) are written for mass-consumption. The mass market wants and usually gets a considerably lower standard of thought, argument and evidence than the academic market does.

Use popular sources *only* when you are able to establish the reliability of the piece you're interested in. Even then you should be very careful, as they often simplify beyond the level of detail you need in your dissertation. If they reference secondary academic sources, rather get those. If they don't, chances are you won't be able to tell the quality of what you're reading, with the possible exception of original research. Even then, unless the methods are described, you still won't be able to judge the quality of the work. Chances are, the methods won't be described in any detail. The masses do not like methodology.

As far as Internet sources are concerned: The Internet in general and the World Wide Web in particular contain vast quantities of information easily accessible to anyone with a computer and a modem. For academic researchers, the web is potentially both a goldmine and a minefield. It comes down to two problems.

First is locating the useful stuff. Unless you have the web address, it can be a daunting, time-consuming task. It is easy to spend hours upon hours browsing and to end up with very little that is usable. There are various techniques and advanced searching aids designed to help, but even at the best of times search engines cover only a fraction of the web. You'll probably still get far too much information, too loosely focused.

The second problem is establishing the quality of what you find. The information you find is only as strong as the author or the institution behind it. Anybody with an opinion or a product to sell can, and does, put up web pages. It can be almost impossible to establish the credentials of information obtained from the web. The basic academic rule is: *If you are not certain of the quality, don't use it*. If you use the web, use information only from respected organisations: Statistics SA, the UN, known research institutes, peer-reviewed academic journals, and the like. Ignore this advice at your peril. Many academics are automatically suspicious of internet sources, and often with good reason. That probably includes your examiners.Reviewing Books and Articles

A literature review should be a *critical* evaluation of the previous writing that is relevant to what you are doing. 'Critical' in a literature review means 'characterised by careful evaluation and judgment' not 'marked by a tendency to call attention to errors and flaws'. If you're not sure of the difference between the two, study a number of book reviews. Get about ten or twenty, as not all book reviews are equally good. Good book reviews sum up the important parts of a work, and then evaluate the work, its methods, research and conclusions against what is known. You do the same from the perspective of your dissertation, focusing on anything that is relevant to your work.

- If a particular work is badly flawed in some way, by all means point it out, but reserve some room for appreciative comments too. If you focus exclusively on the negative and insist on finding fault in everything that you read without acknowledging the positive, you imply that your work is going to be far superior to all the work you've trashed. And then you're going to have to live up to that. You want to achieve, as far as possible, a dispassionate, balanced overview of previous work. Being consistently negative won't achieve that – unless the entire field is rubbish of course, but that's not terribly likely.

The only way you are going to have something sensible to say about the works is to have an in-depth understanding of them, and an understanding of how they pertain to your work. A good way to go about getting that is to pose yourself explicit questions about the works and then to answer them. The questions should fall into two categories – general questions about the work, and questions that are specific to the field/your dissertation.

SOME GENERIC QUESTIONS

These are questions that apply to all academic works, be they books, articles or dissertations.

- Who is the author? Does that tell you anything about the work?

  Look particularly at the author's background. This can reveal a purpose and a perspective that influenced the work. It can also establish the person's credentials quite quickly. Easy places to look include the back cover, the preface/foreword and a list of other works the person has published. The acknowledgements can also be useful. Sometimes even a very quick search on the Internet will tell you what you want to know. Often amazon.com and other major online booksellers have a short biographical piece on authors.
- Who is the publisher? Some presses are more prestigious than others, and academic presses attract more scholarly works than commercial presses do. In the case of journals – is it peer reviewed? How well respected is it in the field?
- When was the work published? What new knowledge has been added to the field since the work's publication? Which points still stand?
- If there is a thesis or a theme running through the work, what is it? Is it important? Does it have implications for previous work? If it doesn't have a main argument, what is new in the work? What is its contribution?
- Does the author adequately cover his or her topic? In other words, was what was promised in the beginning done? Are there any major gaps? If so, where? Why do you think the author left those gaps?

  Promises about a work are not always explicitly stated, but can often be found in the title, preface and/or introduction. With those in mind, establish where (or on what) the author spends the most time and whether that is appropriate. Always weigh the answers to this question against what the author intended to do, *not* against what you would have liked them to do.

A closely related question is whether or not the work is appropriately focused. Does it go off on tangents? Is everything clearly relevant? Is everything in balance with the rest? Remember, length = importance.

- What basic assumptions or 'givens' can you spot? What does that tell you?

  Look for what is *not* said as much as for what is said. As for several of the other questions, a close reading of the table of contents (or examination of an article's structure) can be of great help in answering this question.
- Are the method used and evidence provided appropriate? Does the author make a strong case? Are there any places where the author offers unsubstantiated conclusions, draws more from the evidence than it will bear, or is illogical? Does the author make unwarranted inferences or inappropriate comparisons? If so, what does that tell you?
- Does the piece work as a whole or are some parts stronger than others? Why? Conversely, are some parts weak? Which parts and why?
- Is the author being controversial, or engaging other writers in the field on any particular points? If so, are you convinced? If not, why not?
- Ask some aesthetic questions too – is the work logically structured? Does it provide the necessary background information? Does it read well or is it confusing? Is the writing good, average or awful?

The list above is by no means exhaustive. Practice inevitably leads to a set of personal favourite questions. Make and keep a list for yourself, including field- and dissertation-specific questions.

By asking the right questions, you will be able to answer the following – in terms of your field of study and especially, in terms of your dissertation, what has the work under consideration contributed? That's a critical analysis.