4 Searching and Reviewing the Literature

Mary Ebeling and Julie Gibbs

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Resources
By the end of this chapter, you will:

- know what a literature review is and what purposes it serves in social science research;
- understand how you will use a literature review in your dissertation or thesis;
- know how to start searching for literature to include in your review;
- understand the main databases and electronic resources for social science reviews;
- know how to make notes and build up your references either on paper or with software;
- be confident that you can stop your search after having covered the literature.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 3 on designing a research project, the stages of research were discussed – from choosing a research question, deciding upon the best method for your question to more practical considerations such as respondent recruitment and planning a timetable. In this chapter, on searching and reviewing the literature, an essential component to the research process is discussed, considering both why a literature review is important to your research question and what the most effective methods for conducting a successful review are.

The literature review in the social sciences is an important foundation for your research project, as it will help to frame and strengthen your research question as well as help you to hone your searching and analytical skills. By writing a critical and thoughtful literature review, most importantly, you can demonstrate your knowledge of the research field and how your work fits into a larger picture.

4.2 LITERATURE REVIEWS: WHY AND HOW

Students new to the social sciences can feel some trepidation when facing the prospect of doing the literature review. ‘What is the purpose of a literature review?’ ‘How do I write one?’ ‘Isn’t it the most boring part of the research project?’, ‘I’m not sure what a literature review looks like’ – these are all common questions and concerns before starting.

There are three fundamental reasons to write a literature review: (1) to learn as much as you can about your research topic; (2) to develop the searching and
analytical skills necessary in a research project; and (3) to demonstrate this knowledge through a coherent and systematic text that helps to link what you have learned from previous research to what you are researching for your own project. A literature review is not simply an annotated bibliography or a series of summaries. A successful literature review is one where there is effective analysis and synthesis of previous work, one that is written with clarity and purpose, one that discusses significant controversies and challenges the researcher’s own perspective.

In this chapter we will help you better understand the aims of the literature review, why it is important to your larger research question, where to start, and how to use reference resources to help you find research, and then we will provide some tips on how to write it.

4.2.1 THE AIMS OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Howard Becker advises students not to be ‘terrorised by the literature’ in his influential writing guide Writing for Social Scientists (1986: 186). Quite often, however, when faced with the enormity of the research field on a given subject, the prospect of writing a literature review can be daunting. However, if the literature review is understood as an opportunity rather than an onerous task, conducting and writing the review can be a very rewarding experience. It will help you learn the history of the research area that you are examining, guide you on how to think about the methods that you might use in your own research project and help you to contextualise and theorise your particular research question, through building on the works of others (Hart, 1999: 27). Seen in this way, the literature review is an opportunity for you not only to learn all that you can about your chosen research topic, but also to guide your research and to enable you to think and argue in a more sophisticated way about the subject.

Within the social sciences, the literature review serves many purposes: some goals are to demonstrate knowledge of the field, to explore controversies and to define new questions or areas for consideration. Generally, reviews of literature should achieve the following (ibid.: 27–8):

- Identify what has been achieved and what needs to be done in regards to the research area.
- Outline all the factors or variables impinging on the research question.
- Provide a contextual framework for the research question.
- Explain the methods or research processes used and their effectiveness in previous studies.
- Explore the relationships between the theories and the practices in the research field under study.
- Provide a rationale for the research question or problem under study.
Demonstrate a deep knowledge of the history and breadth of the subject under study as well as how the intellectual field around it has developed.

Display a knowledge and mastery of the field’s vocabulary in discussing the research question.

4.2.2 WHAT IS AND IS NOT A LITERATURE REVIEW

When you think of a literature review, what first comes to your mind? Do you think of reviews published in the London Review of Books or your Sunday paper? A social science review of the literature serves a different purpose from a book review. In social science, the review systematically examines and synthesises previous studies and theories that have developed around a research question and helps you to build on existing knowledge and frame your research project.

The simplest definition of a literature review is that it is a piece of writing that is a systematic, critical evaluation and synthesis of existing scholarly works, studies, theories and current thinking on a given research subject or area. A review of this kind should be explicit in its methodology, that is, the way that decisions were made about which studies and scholarship were chosen for inclusion in the review should be explained within the review’s narrative (Fink, 2004: 3). Good reviews are those that rely upon original, primary sources of research and studies rather than secondary sources or interpretations of original research. Sources for the literature review can come from books, journal articles, and study reports; any work that contains original research on your specific subject. Reviews are also a space where you can engage critically with the theories and arguments that have developed around your research subject. Argumentation is at the heart of most social sciences, because it helps to build knowledge and advance critical thinking within disciplines, and it is in your own review of the literature that you can interrogate these arguments to organise and frame your research (Hart, 1999: 79). Good reviews also are those that go beyond simply summarising previous research. By the end of your review of the literature, you should not only have identified the key concepts that will frame your research question, but also have teased out significant questions that are still unanswered or not considered by the literature and proposed how your research project might answer these questions. Your research might be able to suggest new directions for the field.

If it forms part of your dissertation or thesis, the purpose of your review is most likely to investigate several theories or concepts that have previously been developed on your research question, as well as allowing you as a researcher to engage with this body of scholarship (Hart, 2001: 7). Before you begin your literature review, however, you should, as far as possible, have refined your research question (see Chapter 3). Suppose that you would like to discover what factors determine marijuana use among 16–24-year-olds in suburban areas of South-East England. Through framing your question to be limited to a
particular geographic area, age group and income bracket, you can begin to consider previous research that has focused on similar topics (Table 4.1). Once the limits and scope of your research question have been decided, they will help you to define the purpose of your literature review. Your defined research question will guide your review and will be the overall theme that will organise it. The aim of the review is not to exhaustively list all that has been written on your question, but to engage critically with a few theories and studies that will help to contextualise your own research. More importantly, however, a review of the literature helps you better understand the debates, controversies and current thinking in your research area.

### 4.2.3 Types of Reviews

There are several types of scholarly reviews, however, the three types of literature reviews that are often relied upon in the social sciences (Petticrew and Roberts, 2006: 19) include:

- **systematic review**: this identifies and synthesises all relevant research on a specific topic. Often a systematic review appraises one hypothesis or links together a series of related hypotheses.

- **meta-analysis**: a quantitative review that uses statistical techniques to synthesise results into a single report.

- **narrative review**: a review that synthesises and assesses primary research into a single, descriptive account.

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<tr>
<th>LITERATURE REVIEW STRUCTURE</th>
<th>LITERATURE TYPE</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Descriptions:</strong></td>
<td>Books, journal articles,</td>
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<tr>
<td>What is cannabis? What effect does it have? What are you using as your definition of young people?</td>
<td>dictionaries and encyclopedias</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Statistics/evidence:</strong></td>
<td>Reports and news articles</td>
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<tr>
<td>What are the numbers of youth using cannabis? Where is the evidence that this is a topic worthy of research?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Theory:</strong></td>
<td>Books, journals, research reports</td>
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<td>What are the main theories as to WHY young people use cannabis?</td>
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<td><strong>Methods:</strong></td>
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<td>Are there special methods need for the study? How have people studied this topic before?</td>
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Systematic reviews tend to be narrowly focused, which are much less comprehensive than narrative reviews, and employ strict methods both in the selection of literature under review as well as how it is analysed. Meta-analytical reviews attempt to capture all of the findings from evidence-based, primary and current research on a particular topic and apply statistical analyses to the data in order to build an integrated, comprehensive picture of the subject under question. Meta-analytical reviews dramatically differ from narrative reviews, which are characterised by more of a qualitative analysis of previous research (Glass et al., 1981). Often meta-analytical reviews can be written as stand-alone articles or books, and although systematic and narrative reviews are also written in this way, they tend to be used to frame or explain new or continuing research or integrated into a larger text, such as a dissertation or thesis.

It is your research question as well as the purpose of your larger thesis or dissertation that will determine which of these types of literature review is most appropriate. If you are writing a literature review for your dissertation or thesis, it is likely that you will be writing a systematic review that may include elements from narrative review methods, in which you will be summarising, appraising and synthesising all the relevant studies and theories developed around your research topic, but it is best to consult with your advisor before selecting one of the three types.

You may find that as you review and synthesise the literature, your research question may change or at least be subtly altered as a result of uncovering new information and integrating it into your research framework. And you may find that the review of the literature is an ongoing process. Once you have completed your primary empirical research, you may have to search out literature in a different area that helps to frame and make sense of your own research findings. Which methodologies worked for other studies, which did not? Which findings were surprising to the researchers and which confirmed their hypotheses?

In all approaches to reviewing the literature, there is an underlying aim: to critique and build on existing social theories, to present a comprehensive overview of existing social scientific research on a given question, to synthesise primary research and studies to demonstrate where new studies can be conducted, or to justify why a particular new study should be undertaken based on previous research.

### 4.3 Searching the Literature

Now you know why a literature review is so important to your project, what should you do next, how do you begin to search through the vast amount of sociological literature out there? Beginning a literature search is a bit like
standing on a diving board at the swimming pool. How deep are you going to dive? What is at the bottom?

Starting to look at the search in a systematic way, thinking clearly about what you want to look at, what your search terms will be and where you are going to look, will help you to remain focused. Once the literature review is under way you may find that the same texts come up time and time again and you will begin to get a clear idea of the key sources of literature for your review.

**TIP**

Don’t let yourself panic about getting started: the very act of starting, however tentative, will relieve anxiety. Just do it!

### 4.3.1 Starting Your Search

The first place to begin to look for literature is in your university library. Your project supervisor should discuss with you what you are going to look for and any key references that they are know (remember, they are the experts). Try to discuss this with them before you begin.

Resarching young people and their use of cannabis will lead us to explore and explain to the reader quite diverse areas, as shown in Table 4.1.

There will be different aspects to your literature review, each requiring different types of literature. If you start with descriptions, look in the library catalogue for specific key words (see below for search tips). It is good to start by looking at a dictionary to find the precise definition of the topic. You may also try typing the keyword into a search engine such as Google and exploring the online literature.

**TIP**

If you are looking for up-to-date statistical information it is better to look online. Ensure that you find a reputable source of information. Most countries have a statistical office which have current statistics on the population. Make sure that you keep a record of your search and the sites that you looked at.
4.3.2 RECORDING INFORMATION

It is worth thinking about how you are going to store and record your information before you begin your search, because you will then have consistent records that are easy to work with, rather than scraps of paper all over the desk. Making notes and keeping records is a matter we shall return to later in the chapter. Software such as the Endnote and Reference Manager programs can make the process of recording information, making notes and putting it all into a finished bibliography easier. These programs are generally free to students through their institution.

The difference between Endnote and Reference Manager is a matter of personal preference. In both programs, you create libraries for your project, adding a record for each book, article or online resource you look at. You can also store your notes in these records. Both programs allow you to ‘cite as you write’ in Microsoft Word and this can be very helpful and save time.

You can also use Microsoft Word or Excel to keep your notes and records in order. It is worth remembering to back up your work onto another disk, CD or hard drive to avoid pain if the work is lost.

Of course some people do not like to use IT and prefer paper records. There are two main options: a card system or notepads. The key for paper records is to be consistent in your note-taking, making sure you have the same information for each book, article or other resource that you have found. There is more on this later in the chapter.

4.4 RESOURCES FOR SEARCHING

4.4.1 THE LIBRARY

Most university libraries use a classification system called the Dewey Decimal Classification System. Each subject will have its own reference number, for example, Sociology books always have the classification number 301 (see Hart, 2001: 166, for the classification numbers of all subjects). By the time you are doing your dissertation, you should be well versed in the way that your institutional library works.

Once you have located an area where there are books on your topic, look at the other books in that area. When you find a relevant text, look at the bibliography and note or copy it to find key authors. Once you have a few books on the topic, you may find that you see the same names repeatedly in the reference lists. Go back to the catalogue and try to find a book by the author who is being cited. Looking at original work where possible is better than quoting from secondary sources. At this stage you will only be skim reading the books, looking for keywords. If there is a substantial amount of material in that book on your topic, keep it to read later on.
The university library may not be sufficient for your needs. If you are undertaking doctoral research, then you may need to go and find a more specialised library. Large charities often have their own research libraries. For example, Drug Scope has its own excellent library on drug research. You can often visit these libraries by prior arrangement, sometimes for a fee. You will not be able to take the books out of the library, so bear in mind that you may either have to stay and write copious notes or spend money photocopying articles to read later. These libraries are sometimes the only place where you can read specialised or rare texts.

You can search the catalogues of other libraries to see if they contain books that will be useful. Online Public Access Catalogues (OPAC) are free library catalogues that are available online. One example is the OPAC of the British Library, which has 12 million references fully searchable online (http://catalogue.bl.uk) and Copac is another (http://www.copac.ac.uk).

Most libraries in universities provide online access to a large number of journals where you can search for articles and download them in PDF format for free. Some specialised journals will charge a small amount for their articles. There is often a key journal for the area that you are studying and your supervisor should be able to advise you of this. If you are not aware of a specialist journal, try searching the large databases detailed below first to see what journals come up most often in your search.

4.4.2 DATABASES

There are a number of databases that contain bibliographic records of social science literature. Normally these are listed and accessed through your library web pages. The four large databases for social sciences are the International Bibliography for the Social Sciences, Ingenta Connect, Copac and the Web of Knowledge.

Before using any of these databases, you will need to register with them. In the UK, this is done through a system known as Athens registration. Athens is a secure way of gaining access to a large number of academic and educational resources that you would otherwise have to pay to use. Once you have found records of interesting articles in the databases discussed below and have logged on as an Athens user, there will be a link to the journal from which you will be able to download a PDF of the article and print it, without the hassle of leaving your desk and finding it in the library. You can find further details about Athens and a list of the institutions and contacts who use Athens at http://www.athens.ac.uk/. In most cases you log on to Athens via your library web pages which will have a link to electronic resources. Each of the resources listed below will be available as a link from your library.

Because online resources change frequently, going into detail about them is not feasible in a text book. If you get stuck using these resources, the best advice is to speak to a librarian or to use the help field on that resource.
The International Bibliography for the Social Sciences (IBSS) is maintained at the London School of Economics and Political Science. It has over two million bibliographic references, focusing on the topics of anthropology, economics, politics and sociology. The references may be books, journal articles, and reviews dating back to 1951, including the regular indexing of over 2,500 social science journals (IBSS Quick Tips 2006). IBSS has a useful Getting Started section with tips on getting the best out of the database and this is a good starting point for your search.

IngentaConnect is another large database that covers around 30,000 publications. However, IngentaConnect is more general that IBSS and so not all the publications are related to social science.

Copac differs from the above databases. It is a library catalogue from merged sources where you can access the merged online catalogues of 24 major university research libraries in the UK and Ireland as well as the British Library, the National Library of Scotland, and the National Library of Wales/Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru. Copac is useful if you are unable to locate a specific book or report and want to get an interlibrary loan.

The ISI Web of Knowledge includes the Social Science Citation Index. This index can help you to find articles and other materials that have been cited by other publications. You can do a general search to find articles, or search specifically for articles which have cited a specific author. So, if you find a key text which comes up a lot in your search, you could do a citation search on that author to see who else is writing in that area.

A citation is simply a reference to another person’s work. Academics use citations from other authors’ work to back up an argument or to make a point. Citation Indexes such as the Web of Knowledge involve the searcher looking for an author. Results will show other published articles that have referenced that author in some way. This is very useful when you have found a key text and want to know who else has used that text and this often yields further references for your review.

TIP

Find your key texts before using the citation search on the ISI Web of Knowledge and use it to gather further material for your review.

4.4.3 SEARCH ENGINES

Using a basic search engine may seem like the fastest way to begin your literature search, but there are pitfalls to this approach that need careful consideration. Google is the most popular search engine and it can very helpful. However,
Google can yield hundreds, thousands or even millions of hits for one search term, and that is clearly not a practical start to your literature search! Search engines such as Google, Yahoo or Ask use ‘robots’ or ‘spiders’, that go out and search the text of web pages, in order to build the databases that you search. This means that the ‘hits’ that are at the top of the list are there for a number of reasons related to the engine’s way of ranking pages, and it does not necessarily follow that those pages are good, reliable sources of information. Be aware when searching on the internet that there are many bogus or unreliable sites that you would not want to use in your academic work.

Having warned you of the pitfalls, it is important to say that these large search engines can be very helpful if you have found a source through reading or mentioned by your supervisor and you want to locate it. This may be at a point later in your reviewing when you have found your main literature using other means.

Searching databases or search engines can be a lot easier if you understand the way that they function. Most search facilities use Boolean logic, which allows three types of basic search ‘AND’, ‘OR’ and ‘NOT’. Hart (1999) includes a discussion of Boolean logic searching.

In this chapter we have used the example of young people and marijuana in suburban locations in South-East England. To begin a search for a literature review on this subject, you might start with a list of the four main databases above. You should write down the search terms that you are going to use and be consistent in each search that you do. You might start with the following search terms and use each one once in each databases:

- Young people AND marijuana OR cannabis OR dope
- Young people AND drugs AND South-East England
- Young people AND drugs in suburbia

You may find that you are getting a number of hits that are not useful, for example, you may find records for articles about the treatment of long-term drug use which you are not especially interested in. To deal with this, you could run the search again with an additional NOT criterion:

- Young people AND marijuana OR cannabis OR dope NOT treatment

Once you have a results list for each of your search terms, look carefully through them and discard any that do not look useful. The rest can be saved, usually by ticking a box next to the result and clicking on a ‘save’ or ‘email’ icon on the database page. You can then get the results e-mailed to you for future reference. At this stage, you are just gathering information and should not yet locate each reference. Using this method you will quickly find the key texts in the subject area, and the key experts who are writing in the field.
4.4.4 OTHER RESOURCES

There may be other resources that are important for your topic. For the example of cannabis use among young people, it is useful to think of other sources of information that can provide evidence for your research. These other resources generally fall into three areas:

1. **Official statistics**: Official statistics can be helpful in providing basic evidence of the importance of your research and can provide a sound start to the literature review. Most countries have their own statistical organisations: for example, in the UK, the Office for National Statistics and in the USA, FedStats. It is also worth visiting the web pages for the Government Department relevant to your research area, where you can often find and download official publications.

2. **Charities or specialist organisations**: There are often key charities or organisations working in the area that have a range of information and publications on their web pages. Large charities also often have libraries which researchers can visit for a small fee which contain rare books and articles.

3. **Other ad hoc resources**: Sometimes you will find other web resources which do not fall into the above two categories, such as the site of a particular research group or the website of people interested in the topic. Be wary of the quality of these resources. A general guide to evaluating web resources can be found on INTUTE: [http://www.vts.intute.ac.uk/](http://www.vts.intute.ac.uk/)

4.5 WHAT TO DO WITH THE INFORMATION

By this point you will have a large pile of books from the library, a list of key journals in the area and a number of saved searches from the databases. What do you do now?

4.5.1 WRITING NOTES

Often the best way forward is to pick up the first book or article that comes to hand and begin to skim read to find if it is useful. If you think it will be a key text, resist the urge to read it all and just make a note of its importance. Use whatever method of note-taking that works for you, i.e. a computer file or a simple notepad. Ensure that you are being consistent in your notes. Start each with the author's full name, the title, the date of the publication, where it was published, the ISBN number if applicable and the pages that you have read or you think will be useful later on. An example of a record card is shown in Figure 4.1.
This may sound tedious but when you are in a panic because your dissertation is due tomorrow and you can't find a reference, you will be very grateful you made these notes now! You will notice in your skim reading if certain authors are coming up again and again, or if a specific article is being referenced frequently. It is probably worth going back to the databases or library to find these often cited articles. You should always try to get hold of the original of a work rather than quote from a secondary resource.

It may also be helpful to develop a list of keywords attached to your notes, such as ‘cannabis’, ‘young people’, ‘dope’, ‘suburbs’, ‘methodology’, and so on, to help you categorise when you come to write the review. If you are using one of the bibliographic software packages described above, there are fields for all of these notes and references built in.

Once you have reviewed all of the information you obtained in your searches, you can start to read those articles and books you noted as being of key importance. These notes will be much more detailed with quotes and the beginnings of ideas for the arguments to be included in your literature review.

**TIP**

Remember to note the page numbers of every quote and important point as this will save time later on.

### 4.5.2 BIBLIOGRAPHIES AND CITATIONS

The importance of your bibliography and the way you cite published works should never be underestimated. Supervisors and examiners will look closely at all your references for signs of plagiarism, so it is vital that every quote or argument throughout your project is properly referenced. When you use a reference for the first time, go to the end of the document and put the reference in.
you have finished, print the bibliography and go through your chapter, ticking off each reference as you read to ensure that they are all there.

Generally, social scientists use the following style of citation:

**Books**
Name (date) *Title*. Place of publication: Publisher.

For example:

**Journals**
Name (date) ‘Article title’, *Journal Title*, Journal edition (Issue): page numbers, date of publication, and if applicable the URL and date accessed.

For example:

**Online references**
Name of web pages. Date if known. Author if known. Name of site URL. Date accessed

For example:

Citation style can vary between academic institutions so check your dissertation handbook or with your supervisor to make sure you are using the right style. Hart (2001) has a useful section on citations.

Throughout this chapter the importance of keeping good records has been emphasised. Records should be kept in good order so that if you have problems later on with, say, a supervisor asking to see your notes you will be able to produce them. Plagiarism is a major problem in academic settings and the best way to protect yourself is to keep clear consistent records of your reading. Do not throw your notes away as soon as the project is handed in!

**Structuring your review: researching drug use amongst 16–24-year-olds**
This is a synopsis of an actual literature review project for an undergraduate dissertation on Young People and Drugs in the Community. You can see the structure of the chapter with the official statistical evidence outlined first
followed by the more theoretical arguments as to why young people use drugs and the effect that this may have on the community. This is how a draft of the literature review should be drawn up with the actual notes and data filled in later on.

**Introduction**

General statement as to why this review is important and what it will encompass. Definitions of terms to be used, e.g., how are you defining ‘young people’.

**Statistics**

A review of young people and drug use. Identifying trends over the past 10 years. Use statistics from official publications, Government papers. Critique of these statistics, for example, official police statistics do not include all drug use just that identified by the authorities. What other statistics can be used? How do they help us to explain drug use?

**Surveys of drug use**

School surveys of drug use. What do they find? What information can we glean from them?

**Regional use**

We are focusing on drug use in the regions of the UK here, especially in our ongoing example of South-East England. We must demonstrate in the review that the regional differences (if there are any) in drug use have been explored. This will use official statistics and survey data as above.

**Explanations for young people’s drug use**

This is the more theoretical part of the review which looks at theories as to why drug use is so high among young people. You should be using the key texts that you have found here from books and journal articles.

**Government strategy**

A look at what the government is planning on doing to control young people’s use of drugs and the main targets that have been set.

**Summary**

Brief conclusion of the evidence reviewed in the chapter.

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**TIP**

Remember to write your bibliography as you go along if you are not using a software package that will generate it automatically.
**4.6 ENOUGH IS ENOUGH! KNOWING WHEN TO STOP**

Knowing when to stop reading and looking for references can be difficult, because one always feels that an important reference has been missed. If you have completed a systematic review as outlined in this chapter and have read the key texts in the field, it is likely that you have found the books, articles and experts in the area. Once the fieldwork is finished, you are happy with the research question, and you have systematically searched the literature for each topic, you can be confident that you can stop.

**4.7 SUMMARY**

In this chapter, we have explored the purposes and goals that the research literature review serves in the social sciences and some methods for conducting a successful review. A good literature review examines previous research and theories on a particular research subject and systematically analyses and synthesises this work. The second part of the chapter has shown how to carry out a systematic search of the literature and how to make notes and keep a record. The example on p. 000 shows how all of this information might be brought together to structure the review.

**CHECKLIST**

- Do you know where the books are in the library for the subject you are looking for?
- Have you asked your advisor for their opinion on the key texts in the subject?
- Have you identified keywords for your database search?
- Do you have access to an Athens username and password through your institutional library?
- Have you thought about record keeping?
- Identify which system you will use for notes and referencing, for example, software or paper.
- Are there other organisations or charities with libraries on your topic?
- Are you sure that the web references you are using are reliable and trustworthy?
- Do you know the exact citation style for your department?
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the main purpose of the literature review in the social sciences?
2. How should you go about starting a systematic review?
3. What are the main resources that you could use to demonstrate knowledge of the field?
4. What are the main differences between the major databases that you might use for your research?

RESOURCES

Becker (1986) Writing for Social Scientists is a classic writing guide for the social sciences, Becker reassures readers on the challenges and fears faced by students embarking on dissertation or thesis writing projects by providing practical hints and sharing stories of his own uphill battles with writing.

Fink (2004) Conducting Research Literature Reviews: From the Internet to Paper is a very clear and concise how-to guide to searching for and reviewing literature in the social sciences.

Hart (1999) Doing a Literature Review: Releasing the Social Science Research Imagination, and Hart (2001) Doing a Literature Search. Both books serve as complements to one another and are extensive and comprehensive guides to writing literature reviews. Hart targets both books for postgraduates in the social sciences and the guides are sympathetic to the many questions and concerns students have when approaching large writing projects.

The following web pages are useful:

International Bibliography of the Social Sciences: http://www.ibss.ac.uk
Copac: http://www.copac.ac.uk
Web of Knowledge: http://wok.mimas.ac.uk/
IngentaConnect: http://www.ingentaconnect.com
DrugScope: http://www.drugscope.org.uk