

# Chapter 4

## The Literature Review

### Examining the Background for a Study

*Understanding Research: A Consumer's Guide*, First Edition

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# By the end of Chapter 4, you should be able to:

- Define a literature review and list ways that it is important for researchers and practitioners.
- Describe how authors use literature in their quantitative and qualitative research studies.
- List the different types of literature available.
- Take steps for reviewing the literature about a topic of your choice.
- Prepare a summary of a quantitative and qualitative research report.

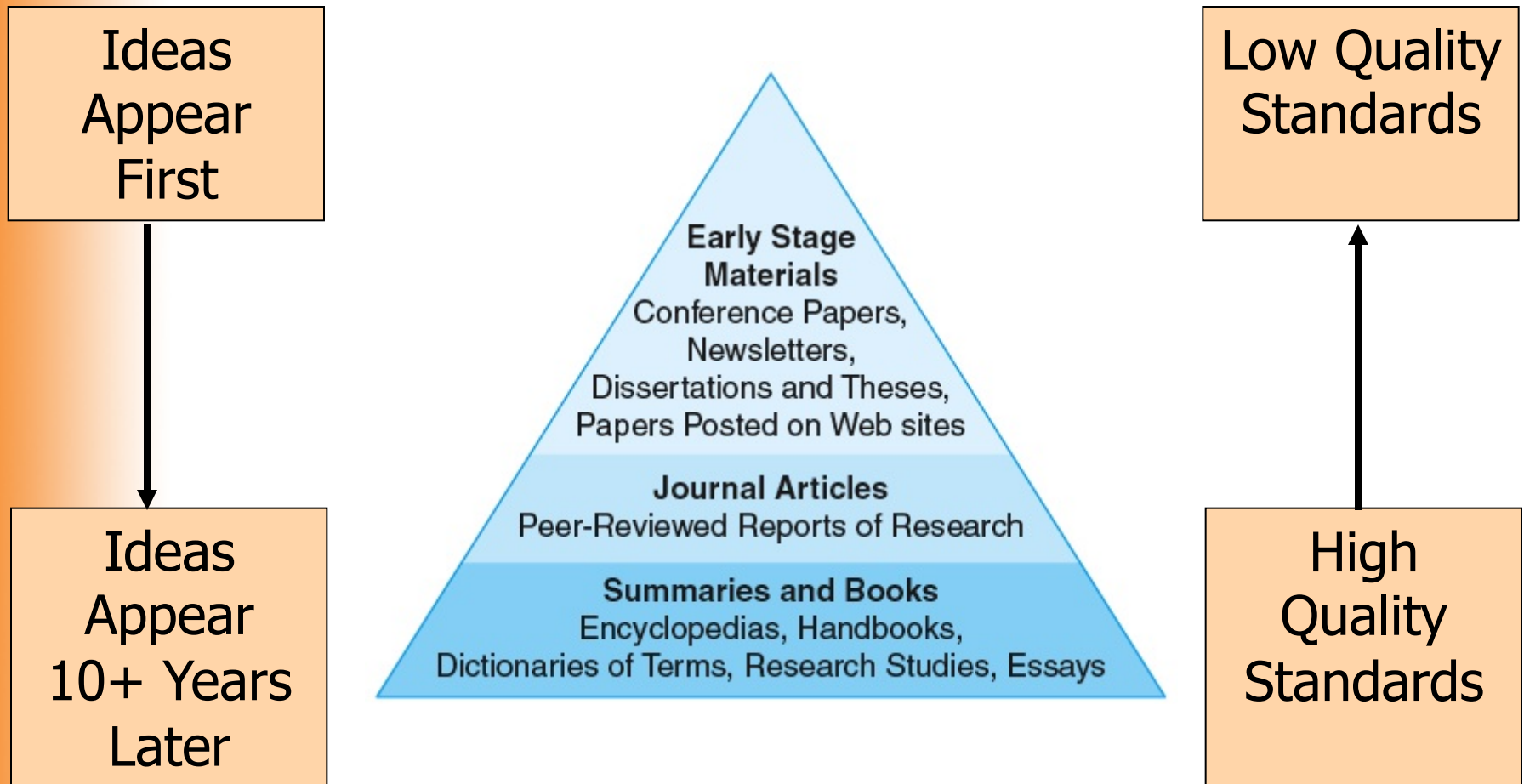
# What is a literature review?

- A **literature review** is a written summary of journal articles, books, and other documents that describes and critiques the past and current state of information about a topic, organizes the literature into sub-topics, and documents a need for a study.

# How do researchers use literature in their reports?

- To provide evidence to justify the research problem
- To document what is and is not known
- To identify theories and conceptual frameworks behind a study
  - **Theory**: explains and predicts the probable relationship among variables in quantitative research
  - **Conceptual framework**: a philosophical perspective or body of knowledge that informs a qualitative study
- To provide models for the study's methods and procedures
- To help interpret the results

# What types of literature are available to review?



# Literature types

- **Summaries:**

- Major publications that provide overviews of literature
- Good source to first learn about an area

- **Journal articles:**

- Published at regular intervals to report research in its original state by the original author
- Highest quality: peer-reviewed journals
- Best way to learn about current state of knowledge

- **Early stage literature:**

- New ideas and work, often posted to websites
- Use with care as work has usually not been screened for quality

# What are the steps for reviewing the literature?

- Identify key terms related to the topic of the literature review
- Use search strategies to locate literature
- Select literature that is of good quality and relevant
- Take notes on the key aspects of each selected document

# Step 1--Identify key terms

- Identify two to three key terms to use in electronic searches
  - Pose a question that you want to answer and identify two to three words that summarize the primary topics
  - Write a title for your project and select two to three words that capture the central ideas
  - Select words used by authors in the literature
  - **Example:** Student Violence and Weapon Use by Middle School Students



# Step 2--Use search strategies

- Search databases developed for identifying research articles:
  - ERIC
  - Psychological Abstracts
  - Sociological Abstracts
  - EBSCO Information Services
  - PubMed
- Consider using *Advanced Search* feature
  - Use multiple key terms, but not too many
  - Use "logic" terms: AND, OR, " "
  - Focus on recent literature (e.g., past ten years)
  - Start with journal articles

# Step 3--Select literature

## ■ **Good Quality**

- Meet definition of research  
(quantitative or qualitative)
- Peer-reviewed
- Recent

## ■ **Relevant**

- Does the literature focus on the same topic?  
or
- Does the literature examine the same individuals or sites?  
or
- Does the literature examine the same research problem?

# Step 4--Take notes

- Take notes in the form of writing an abstract about the article
  - Aim for about 350 words
  - Identify the following about the study in your own words:
    - Reference to the source
    - Research problem
    - Purpose, research questions, or hypotheses
    - Data collection procedures
    - Results or findings of the study

# How do you write a literature review?

- Organize the literature into themes
- Write a summary of the major themes
- Include citations to the literature
- Provide your conclusions about the literature

# Organize the literature into themes

- Group the articles into categories
- Develop a visual picture called a literature map
  - Place the key term at the top
  - Sort literature into topical categories
  - Provide a name to each category
  - Indicate your own work on the map
- **Example:** see Fig. 4.6

# Write a summary of the major themes

- **Study-by-study literature review**
  - For each identified theme, provide a detailed summary of each corresponding study
  - Link the summaries of the studies together with transitional sentences
- **Thematic literature review**
  - Discuss the major ideas from each theme
  - Briefly cite the literature to document the theme
  - No individual study is discussed in detail

# Include citations to the literature

- Do not plagiarize!
- **Plagiarism** is representing someone else's ideas and writings as if they were your own.
- Do use a style manual
  - Within-text references (see Figure 4.7)
  - End-of-text references (see Figure 4.8)

# Provide your conclusions about the literature

- At the end of your literature review,
  - Identify the major themes in the literature
  - Briefly summarize what you learned about each theme
  - State how this literature informs your work
    - Recommendations for your practice
    - Advance the deficiencies in the literature



# How do you evaluate a literature review?

- In a high-quality research report, the author:
  - Reviews literature on the study's topic.
  - Covers recent literature (last 10–15 years).
  - Includes high quality publications, focusing primarily on journal articles (research and otherwise).
  - May also include books and conference papers to develop an up-to-date description of the literature.
  - Includes numerous citations that are accurately cited according to an appropriate style manual.
  - Comprehensively shows the literature on a topic and positions the study within this literature (such as with a literature map).

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