

Resident Forum

## How to write review of literature in a dissertation?

Arivarasan Barathi<sup>1</sup> , Mahalakshmy Thulasingham<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Department of Preventive and Social Medicine, Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education & Research, Puducherry, India.



**\*Corresponding author:**  
Mahalakshmy Thulasingham,  
Department of Preventive and  
Social Medicine, Jawaharlal  
Institute of Postgraduate  
Medical Education & Research,  
Puducherry, India.

[mahalakshmi.dr@gmail.com](mailto:mahalakshmi.dr@gmail.com)

Received : 22 March 2022

Accepted : 03 April 2022

Published : 10 May 2022

DOI

10.25259/CSDM\_31\_2022

Quick Response Code:



### INTRODUCTION

A dissertation is an essential part of the postgraduate curriculum. The dissertation/thesis provides an opportunity to learn and assess postgraduate students at 'evaluate' and 'create,' the highest level of Bloom's Taxonomy.<sup>[1]</sup> Review of Literature (ROL) is an essential component of any research work and it is a process of critical analysis of the past work.<sup>[2]</sup> ROL for a dissertation involves three steps: (a) adequately retrieving the literature available on that topic, (b) critical analysis of the literature, and (c) writing the review of the literature section. Writing the ROL section in the dissertation is a creative process as the student researcher is expected to present a clear visual map of the available literature and the gap in the current knowledge. This work will provide tips for writing the ROL section of a dissertation.

### Need for review of literature

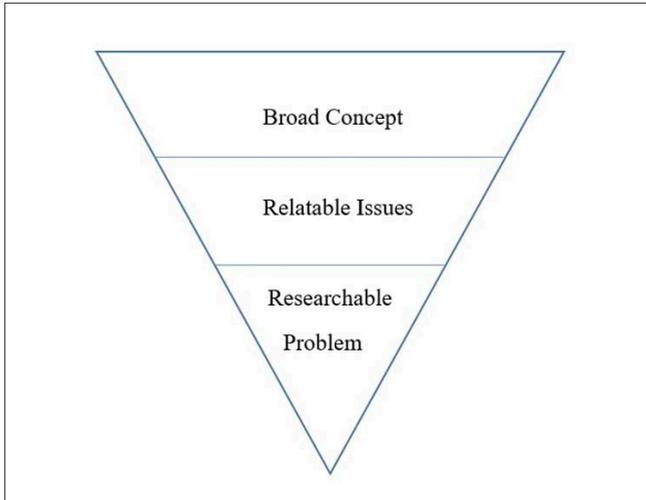
The literature review is one of the pillars on which your research idea stands since it provides context, relevance, and background to the research problem you are exploring.<sup>[3]</sup> Hence, ROL is metaphorically expressed as "standing on the shoulders of giants." ROL provides rationale for the research question, gives the background information related to your study, highlights the knowledge gap, and assists in planning the research methodology. The ROL section of a dissertation showcases the researchers' thorough and up-to-date knowledge of the research topic. A well-done ROL will ease the discussion writing process.

### Writing of review of literature

#### Formulation of a framework for the ROL

It is a good practice to start the ROL by mentioning the databases searched and the keywords/MeSH term.<sup>[4]</sup> The researcher used to retrieve the literature similar to writing in scoping review. The usual search engines used for the literature review are Pubmed, Medline, Cochrane, and GoogleScholar. Unpublished data and book references could also be quoted. It is good to start with making a framework for the ROL. This framework is conceptualized as an inverted triangle, starting from a broad concept and then narrowing down to the related issues and then further to researched problem. Within each component, the research should outline the themes and subthemes [Figure 1].

For example, if we are going to do a study on outcomes of reconstructive surgery for leprosy patients, the broad context would be (a) epidemiology of leprosy, (b) burden of the disease, and (c) natural history of disease with complications. The relatable issues may be (a) treatment options



**Figure 1:** Structural framework for review of literature.

for complications, (b) the need for reconstructive surgery, and (c) various operative procedures. The researchable problem would be (a) the types of reconstructive surgeries and their pros and cons, and (b) other studies on the outcome of reconstructive surgeries on leprosy patients.

This framework will also assist the organization of the references during the literature search. Referencing software such as Zotero or Mendeley could be used to organize relevant literature. Researchers use a summary table to manage the research work to aid in writing the ROL [Table 1]. This table is not usually included in the final ROL, as the information noted is sketchy.

*Style*

Usually, researchers follow either a descriptive style or interpretive style. In the descriptive style, the researcher summarizes the research works in terms of the study site, methodology, sample size, and the main findings. The descriptive style is very rudimentary and doesn't serve the purpose of ROL. Hence, the interpretive style is preferred. Here, the researcher analyses, synthesizes, and critically evaluates the existing literature, analyses the relationship among different works, and summarizes the state of knowledge on the subject.

An example of descriptive style

“A study among 200 students from six different dental colleges in Bengaluru, India was conducted by XXXX et al. in 2015. Emotional Intelligence was assessed using the 30 items Emotional Quotient questionnaire. They found that ...”

An example of interpretive style

“People living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) have a poor QOL than those in the general population and those with other chronic diseases.<sup>(ref)</sup> A multi-centric study found that QOL among PLWHA was lower than the general population.<sup>(ref)</sup> Similar results were observed in a cross-sectional study done in Africa among 300 participants.<sup>(ref)</sup> However, a cohort study done in Africa has reported that after 12 months of ART, the QOL of PLWHA improved and was closer to that of the general population.<sup>(ref)</sup>”

Use present tense for known facts and hypotheses. Use past tense for discussing results of research articles.

**Organization of the body of the literature**

There are various approaches to organizing the body of a literature review. These are ROL to be outlined as either chronological (organize by time), thematic (organize by theme), methodological (organize by methodology), or theoretical (organize by theoretical approach).<sup>[5]</sup> Depending on the length of your literature review, you can combine several of these strategies. The usual format followed for the postgraduate dissertation is that the overall structure might be thematic, and within each theme, literature is discussed chronologically. However, be careful to avoid simply listing and summarizing sources in order.

**General tips**

- Remember to include significant past works. However, summarize historical aspects and don't elaborate on historical data.
- Always read the complete text as, many times, the abstract does not give the entire picture of the research work. Critical analysis of the research work is easier than reading the full text.
- Systematic review or expert review eases the critical review process. However, it is essential to go through the articles quoted in the reviews to gain a complete understanding of the concepts.
- Always take back up while writing ROL. Either it could be in the Cloud (such as Google Drive or dropbox or emailing a copy) or in a pen drive/hard disk.
- Pay attention to naming MS Word files while writing your dissertation. Have a consistent naming style that is intuitive short. Include a version number and date for easy identification of the latest versions. For example: thesis\_rol\_v1\_22april or thesis\_rol\_v3\_after review by guide.

**Table 1:** Table of content format for quick review of articles for review of literature.

Sl. no	Author & year of study	Place of study	Study participants (characteristics)	Sample size	Criteria used in study / comparison group	Results	Remarks
1.							

## CONCLUSION

A review of literature is a continuous process that starts with the formulation of a research idea. While writing the dissertation, students usually write the ROL section after the methods. A good ROL will assist in the analysis, presentation of data, and discussion. These tips will ease the process of writing ROL.

### Declaration of patient consent

Patient's consent is not required as there are no patients in this study.

### Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

### Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

## REFERENCES

1. Krathwohl DR. A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy: An Overview. *Theory Pract* 2002;41:212–8.
2. Rappale C. The role of the critical review article in alleviating information overload. *Annu Rev* 2011. [Accessed 2022 April 23]. [https://www.annualreviews.org/userimages/ContentEditor/1300384004941/Annual\\_Reviews\\_WhitePaper\\_Web\\_2011.pdf](https://www.annualreviews.org/userimages/ContentEditor/1300384004941/Annual_Reviews_WhitePaper_Web_2011.pdf).
3. Ketcham CM, Crawford JM. The impact of review articles. *Lab Invest* 2007;87:1174–85.
4. Baumann N. How to use the medical subject headings (MeSH). *Int J Clin Pract* 2016;70:171–4.
5. Ridley D. *The literature review: A step-by-step guide for students*. 2nd ed. New Delhi (India): Sage; 2012.

**How to cite this article:** Barathi A, Thulasingham M. How to write review of literature in a dissertation? *CosmoDerma* 2022;2:37.