

10 Fundamental Thesis Preparation Tips

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Tip Number 7 – The Literature Review

Unquestionably, the worst written chapter in the bulk of research student theses. The most common flaw is that research student literature reviews are nothing more than a concatenated set of references that have some peripheral relevance to the research.

The purpose of the literature review is to establish a basis for the research methodology. It is to identify the history of the research field, the varying schools of thought in the field and the seminal/key authors in the field. Based upon the views of these learned peers – and the approaches they see as being suitable for further research – or the shortcomings that they identify in research that need to be addressed – the research student should develop his/her methodology.

If a research student's methodology is not a direct follow-on from the findings from the reviewed literature, then it does not follow a systematic chain of discovery. It is one thing for an eminent researcher to pursue an altogether new field of research which is a non-sequitur to the work of others – generally this is not acceptable for a research student. The basic principle is that the research student is an apprentice who needs to learn how to follow the chain of discovery. The literature review chapter in the thesis must be a clear illustration of the chain of discovery.

It is also often the case that for a given field of research the amount of available literature is vast and it is not possible to review all the literature. The starting point for the literature review chapter is therefore for the thesis author to present a defense of how the literature was reviewed. How was the scope limited in a systematic way? Why were some areas omitted and others included.

Finally, if the research student has a clearly articulated central research theme for his/her thesis, then every literature inclusion or exclusion in the literature review chapter needs to satisfy particular criteria. References should only be included if they relate specifically to the central research theme or if they provide some historical or technical context to the work. A literature review chapter should not just include a large number of references in the field just to make the research student appear well read – this is blatantly transparent to the examiner.