Research Questions for Literature Reviews

Why a Literature Review?

You are undertaking a literature review for two reasons: first to identify and summarize existing research on a topic you have a question about; and second, to evaluate that research as it applies to your research question. In graduate education studies, literature reviews are usually conducted as a preliminary step to designing and conducting your own research study. You don't want to reinvent the wheel; you want to build your research on what already exists. That is the nature of graduate study: finding out what has been done and building something new on that foundation.

There are several side benefits of conducting literature reviews: exposure to current research in your field, understanding of various research processes, ability to evaluate those processes, familiarity with the style and forms of academic and professional writing.

As a graduate student in education, you will eventually write a literature review for an *action research* project. Action research is different from other research styles in two ways. First, it is *local,* meaning that it is intended for a limited situation like a specific school, specific classroom, or specific group of people. The results of such research cannot be assumed to apply outside its specified context. The second difference in action research is that it is conducted within the researcher's own work environment to meet a need identified by the researcher. In other research styles, the researcher would select populations and sites outside his or her own sphere of influence to answer a question for a more general need.

Knowing why you are undertaking a literature review, and understand the unique nature of action research will influence your choice of research question.

Topic vs. Opinion vs. "Real" Research Question

Naming a topic does not provide a basis for research. You undertake research to find out something about a topic. What are you trying to find out about the topic? You may notice, for example, that playground <u>bullying</u> (a topic) has become a problem at your elementary school. You want to solve the problem (or at least lessen the number and severity of incidents), but first you need to know *what factors affect the number and severity of bullying incidents on elementary school playgrounds?* There is your research question. Notice that the question is fairly general; it does not ask what factors affect bullying on *your* school's playground. No such research exists. You will have to build your local solution (and then test it with action research) by analyzing research of others and then asking how it might apply to your situation. That analysis and application will be your literature review.

Your literature review will be useful and manageable only if you have a *real question.* Do not start out with an opinion. Do not start out with a question you think you already have an answer to. Suppose you have already decided to petition your school's principal for additional staff for additional staff to monitor the playground because you are convinced that bullying flourishes if adult supervision is lacking. If you have already objectively verified this claim, why are you undertaking the research again?   If you start your research already convinced, you are likely to (a) learn nothing useful, (b) lean towards only that research that supports your untested opinion, (c) bore yourself silly.

If you start your literature review with a thesis (opinion statement), you walk right into a dead end. The thesis is the *answer* you are seeking, the purpose for the literature review, the conclusion you will come to at the end. *Bullying most frequently results from physical and psychological abuse at home and requires family counseling to correct.* That is a thesis. How did you arrive at it? By drawing a conclusion from the research. This is not a chicken-or-egg issue. The question comes *before* the conclusion. If you want a thesis statement at the beginning of your paper, retype your conclusion there, right after stating the research question. But you'll spoil the excitement for readers.

Refine the Topic

The most common problem is naming a topic that is too broad. *Classroom management* is too broad. An EBSCO search using that term yields 1,428 documents, even if the search is limited to scholarly articles.

You could narrow the topic by saying what the terms means to you or what you are relating it to: for example, teacher control and discipline? Synchronized, individualized learning tasks? Cooperative social environment? Student participation? Teacher training? You could also limit the topic by grade level, specialty populations, type of school, and so on. You could do a historical study of how the concept of classroom management has changed over the decades. What you *cannot* do is try to cover all aspects of classroom management in a single literature review. You will end up with a superficial treatment of the topic that contributes nothing to the professional literature.

You could ask a closed question like this: *Does student participation in rule-making result in positive group behavior in elementary classrooms?* Your research would be limited to studies that attempted to find a "yes" or "no" answer to this question or one similar to it.

You could ask an open question like this: *How can student participation in rule-making be employed to improve student group behavior in elementary classrooms?* Your research would expand to include research on various strategies of student participation in rule-making.

You could combine the two questions to ask if-yes-then-how. Be aware that you may not find an exact match between research studies and your question. It is your job as a scholar to find the research that most closely addresses the question and then explain to readers how it does.

Characteristics of a Good Research Question for a Literature Review

A good research question can be answered by collecting and analyzing data.

Your literature search will be limited to scholarly research, which nearly always attempts to answer questions by gathering and analyzing data. If you ask a question that can't be address by data, you will not have a researchable question. An example of an unresearchable question would be one like this: *Will text messaging be the end of spelling as we know it?* That is an interesting question, but inappropriate as a *research* question because data could not answer a question about behavior in the future.

Another unresearchable question is this: *Do parents have a moral obligation to be involved in their children's schools?* Although worthwhile for individual consideration, questions of morals, values, and religious faith cannot be answered by data collection and analysis. (You could, however, survey a group of people to determine *if they believe* parents have a moral obligation to be involved in their children's education, but you would then be asking a different question.)

A good research question assumes the possibility of different outcomes or opinions.

What is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act? There is no room for opinion in this question. Any credible source will provide identical information (though some sources will provide more, some less). There is no way to draw a conclusion from it. This question might be the start of a report, but not of a literature review or research design, which require presentation of various points of view in order to add new insights.

How did No Child Left Behind affect the mainstreaming of students receiving special education services? This is a better research question because it will like generate more than one viewpoint, that allowing the writer to reach a conclusion (positive impact, negative impact, no impact, various impacts). The question can also be addressed by the collection and analysis of data, and it is it is limited in scope mainstreaming, special education).

A good research question is narrow.

What makes a good teacher? Think about what kind of research could answer this question. First of all, what does "good" mean? How could "good" be measured or defined? Second, who should answer the question: teachers? Students? Parents? Administrators, NEA lobbyists? Second, would the answers be the same for each grade level? Third, what *kind* of teacher is to be included: science teacher? Tutor? Band director? Economics professor? Parent? You've got the picture. The question is too broad.

A good research question is clear.

What is the best way to teach sex education? Such a question as this would certainly involve a diversity of viewpoints; however, it is also too broad and vague to be meaningful. There is the problem of deciding what "best" means and how it would be measured. There is a question about who would be doing the teaching (public school, parents, religious institution, etc.) There is the problem of context: age and gender of children, type of school, and so on.

One better way to ask a sex education question is this: *Can public middle school sex education classes significantly reduce student pregnancy rates?* This is a better question because it is limited (public middle school, "good" = significant reductions in student pregnancy rates). Although this is a yes/no question, you are likely to uncover a pattern of successful sex education —in other words, what *kind* of instruction resulted in the greatest reductions. In that case you'll have a rich field to harvest for your discussion and conclusion sections of the lit review.

A good research question is a single question.

Sometimes research questions have corollaries (closely related sub-questions), but for now just focus on a single guiding question for which you attempt to find an answer in the existing literature. That single guiding question should not be a multi-part question. For example, do not ask *How have larger class sizes affected student test scores, student behavior, and teacher job satisfaction?* Obviously, that is three questions, not one (in addition to being too broad and vague). You will not be able to manage a paper the length of a literature review if multiple questions are embedded in your research question.

How do teachers and students benefit from teacher in-service training? That's two questions requiring two literature reviews.

A good research question is built on sound assumptions.

To save money I am going to buy a hybrid car. Where can I find the cheapest hybrid? The underlying assumption is that buying a hybrid car will save you money. If so, finding the cheapest hybrid would be worth the search. But will buying a hybrid save you money? Independent consumer research shows probably not, depending upon what you're driving now, how much you drive, and the price of gas. If saving money is the goal, then why research hybrid prices instead of researching cheaper cars that would save you more money?

How can schools get parents involved in their children's education? The question contains a strong assumption: that children would benefit from their parents' getting involved. Once you have clarified the meaning of "involved in their children's education," you must make sure that the benefits of such involvement have been supported by research, and that the drawbacks of such involvement do not overshadow the benefits. If your assumption is faulty, you've lost your readers at the first paragraph. Check your assumptions before you decide on the question. The validity of the assumption need not be established in the paper, but most readers will know if it is faulty or weak.

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Resources

Badke, W. B. (2008). *Research strategies: Finding your way through the information fog* (3rd ed.). Lincoln, NE: iUniverse.

> Available from the Twin Cities Campus Library, this is the best student-centered book I've seen. It is loaded with tips, resources, and examples of both bad and good research questions. Best of all, the author is *funny*.

Twin Cities Campus Library [Designing a Research Strategy](#)

> The URL for this document is . . .
> http://www2.smumn.edu/deptpages/tclibrary/tutorials/finding/starting.pdf

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> The URL for this document is . . .
> http://www2.smumn.edu/deptpages/tcwritingcenter/writing/lit_review.php

Do good athletes make good students and good citizens? You can do the analysis of this one. Will it fly as a research question? Why or why not?