

Editorial. Writing a literature review: A simple task might be arduous?

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What makes a scientific paper good? I believe everyone has an answer or at least an assumption. The variations in answers are contingent on firsthand experience. The feedback that we receive from reviewers and editors when we submit our papers to journals may help informing our opinion. When specialists scrutinize our manuscripts or when we act as reviewers ourselves, what part of work is of great importance to us? We tend to pay a special attention to methodology, results and discussion sections. Therefore, authors endeavor to present rigorous methods, valid and reliable results, and strong discussion points. But what about the literature review? Are we sufficiently critical of it?

When reading a paper from a field that we do not specialize in, we rarely cast a doubt on the relevance of references. This issue usually falls on the shoulders of authors. Along with the relevance, there are great many other things to worry about such as citation style, self-citation, redundant references, not to mention plagiarism. The scope and complexity of these problems provide an impetus to focus on the enjoyable, for someone tedious, nonetheless, important work on the literature.

Young researchers may be anxious about the amount of materials they need to read to ensure their chosen topic is well-researched. They recognize themselves when they tortured their supervisors about the required number of references to be included in theses or graduation projects. It is not a matter of the required number of references: it is a principle of saturation. We search for books, articles and other sources until we get a feeling that we have enough information to process and answer our questions. However, it is crucial not to cite all works found on the topic. It may lead to redundancy. The golden rule in this case is relevance. As Lakhtakia (2009) points out, a large number of irrelevant references is a sign of false erudition, which nobody wants to be accused of!

A fairly common practice is to find a suitable and useful paper as a starting point. This is not always easy, but once found we carefully study the reference list to find other valuable sources of information. We then study the new material and decide whether or not it is appropriate to include in our research. Unfortunately, some authors resort to this trick to generate a sufficient quantity of references. It must be reminded that integrity should be at the forefront of every stage of research: both in the literature review and in data analysis. The other criterion we are looking for is accuracy. All in-text citations should match the bibliography list. Everything cited should appear in the bibliography which should include nothing that is not cited. It is the responsibility of an author to ensure this correspondence. Regretfully, the evidence shows that sometimes researchers forget this and rely wholly on editors or reviewers. The issue of accuracy is considered in detail by Mack (2018).

Another essential thing to remember is who we are writing for. We are not only writing for ourselves or a professional community. Our works should be understandable and clear for people who represent a wider reading audience. As asserted by Mack (2018), papers should be reader-centric, not author-centric.

The issues touched upon in this short editorial may seem to be so simple and well-known. However, the problem with simplicity is that we can take it for granted and frequently overlook it. I contend that the work with literature is foundational. We all know that if a foundation of a building is not solid, the building can collapse. The same applies to research.

References

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