

Why Bother to Read about your Subject?

Scenario 1: You're passionate about a subject. It is close to your heart. You have a lot that you want to say and can say. Excellent. But stop for moment. Now comes the rigorous part. You have to read and read.

Scenario 2: You know you want to read for a doctorate. You have a vague idea what you want to write about. You struggle to refine your problem statement. Ha! You certainly need to stop. Start reading and reading.

Quite simply, reading the literature about your subject is important for many reasons.

First, you acquire the language with which to speak about your subject. This includes both the jargon of your subject and the ability to express yourself in a scholarly tone.

Second, you gain perspective about the parameters of the research problem and its associated concepts, or to put it differently, you see the “what?” of the research project. For example, if my intention is to research the effect of termination on self-esteem, I am going to have to define and describe the concepts associated with termination and self-esteem.

Third, you gain an understanding of the possible relationships between the concepts from other researchers' findings. Using the same example, namely, the effect of termination on self-esteem, I may need to distinguish between the concepts of self-esteem, self-concept, and self-worth. I would use the literature to differentiate between and within those concepts and decide which I am going to include in my research. For example, there is academic, social, and personal self-esteem. I would need to decide whether the problem statement includes all or some of these differentiations and why. On that basis, I may need to revise my problem statement or make it more specific.

The literature might also suggest that the effect of termination for misconduct and termination because a company has downsized has different effects on self-esteem. On that basis, I might narrow my definition of “termination” to “termination because of downsizing”, and adjust my problem statement in terms of that. Alternatively, I might decide to include a question about why people think they were terminated in order to test if being terminated for misconduct has a different effect on self-esteem than being terminated because of downsizing.

Fourth, you collect ideas about how other people have explored the subject or the methodologies other researchers have used, which helps you to formulate and argue for your own research design.

Fifth, the literature will give you an idea of where the **gaps in the research** are. Often this is what you are hoping to find. Ideally, you want to contribute to the knowledge base of your subject. Essentially there are two ways of contributing. You can choose to contribute by replicating previous studies in order to assess the validity, or not, of previous findings in the same or different contexts. Alternatively, if you discover a gap in the empirical research, an unexplored relationship, you may attempt to investigate that relationship.

Are you convinced of the necessity for reading widely in your field of interest? Next is learning how to cope with the volume of information you will no doubt encounter.

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While on the website, a reminder to register and to collect your free self-editing guide. It contains all the myriad of tricks used extensively by serious writers. Some are wacky, but all work.