Writing the Background Chapters of Your Thesis
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Areas to cover in a research thesis (Phillips and Pugh, 2005)

Background to the study	A state of art review of the field of study, including current developments, controversies and breakthroughs, previous research and relevant background theory
Focus of the study	What is being researched and why
Data used in the study	Justification for the choice of data
Contribution of the study	Importance of the project for the field of study

Areas to cover in the background chapters (Phillips and Pugh, 2005)

Background theory
Focal theory
Previous research

Different degrees and the nature of the literature review (Hart, 1998: 15)

Degree and research product	Function and format of the literature review in research at these levels
BA, BSc, BEd project	Essentially descriptive, topic focussed, mostly indicative of main current sources on the topic. Analysis is of the topic in terms of justification
MA, MSc, MPhil dissertation or thesis	Analytical and summative, covering methodological issues, research techniques and topics. Possibly two literature-based chapters, one on methodological issues, which demonstrates knowledge of the advantages and disadvantages, and another on theatrical issues relevant to the topic/problem
PhD, DPhil, DLitt thesis	Analytical synthesis, covering all known literature on the problem, including that in other languages. High level of conceptual linking within and across theories. Critical evaluation of previous work on the problem. Depth and breadth of discussion on relevant philosophical traditions and ways in which they relate to the problem.

What needs to be included in a review of the literature?

- The key issues which underlie the research project
- The major findings on the research topic, by whom and when
- The main points of view and controversies that surround the issue being investigated
- A critical evaluation of these views, indicating strengths and weaknesses of previous studies on the topic
- General conclusions about the state of the art at the time of writing, including what research still needs to be done; that is, the gap that remains in the research that the study will aim to fill

Some sample literature review chapters (Cargill, 1999: vii-viii)

Chapter 2: English majors in China: An ethnographic mosaic

  A. Introduction: Ethnography in China

  B. The College
    The campus and facilities
    The Chinese Teacher
    The Foreign Teacher in China
    Strategies of resistance
    Traditional, modern, and independent students
    Silence
    Apathy
    The personnel file
    Conclusion

  C. The production of English writing
    Phillipson and linguistic imperialism
    Attitudes toward English in China
    The curriculum and informal English study
    The traditional essay
    The writing classroom
    Conclusion

Chapter 3: The myth of the "turn' in Asian text structure

  A. Kaplan and contrastive rhetoric
    Kaplan's "Cultural thought patterns" article
    Hinds' and Mohan and Lo's critiques of Kaplan
    Kaplan's "Contrastive grammar" article

  B. *Qi cheng zhuan he* in contrastive rhetoric

  C. Hinds on *ki sho ten ketsu*

  D. The *qi cheng zhuan he/ki sho ten ketsu/ki sung chon kyu* trope

  E. *Qi cheng zhuan he* in Chinese scholarship
    Early historical accounts of *qi cheng zhuan* he
    The relationship of *qi cheng zhuan he to* the eight-legged essay
    The eight-legged essay in contrastive rhetoric
    Modern theories of *qi cheng zhuan he* in Chinese scholarship

  F. *Ki sho ten ketsu* in Japanese scholarship
    Chinese origins
    Kubota's critique of contrastive rhetoric
    Japanese multi-part essay formats
    Multiple interpretations of *ten*
    A critique of Maynard's *Principles of Japanese Discourse*

  G. Conclusion: Contrastive and non-contrastive rhetoric

Steps and strategies for writing a literature review (Cone and Foster, 1993)

Steps	Strategies
Locate relevant literature	Identify key authors and journals Use state of the art articles Use computerised searches Use Google Scholar Scan Tables of Contents from key journals Use reference lists from articles, books and chapters Read primary sources Avoid the popular press
Critically read the literature	Identify themes in the literature Identify strengths and weaknesses of individual articles Identify strengths and weaknesses of the field as a whole Collect photocopies of articles
Prepare to write	Investigate expected length and format of the literature review Make a preliminary outline Organise the literature you will cover Limit the scope of the review to the topic at hand
Write the review	Write the introduction Write subsections Use transition markers and metatext (see Chapter 5) Synthesise and critically evaluate the literature Be careful not to plagiarise Practice summarising and paraphrasing actives (see below)
Indicate the gap	Use the review to lead to your study and research question/s

Standards for doctoral literature reviews (Boote and Beile, 2005)

Category	Criterion
Coverage	Justifies inclusion and exclusion of literature from the review
Synthesis	Distinguishes what has been done in the field from what needs to be done Places the topic or problem in the broader scholarly literature Places the research in the historical context of the field Has a command of key terms and notions, discusses and resolves ambiguities in definitions Articulates important variables and phenomena relevant to the topic Synthesizes and gains a new perspective on the literature
Methodology	Identifies main methodologies and research techniques that have been used in the field, their advantages and disadvantages Relates ideas and theories in the field to research methodologies
Significance	Rationalizes the practical significance of the research problem Rationalizes the scholarly significance of the research problem
Rhetoric	Writing has a coherent, clear structure that supports the review

"A literature review that meets high standards on these criteria indicates that the doctoral candidate has a thorough, sophisticated understanding of a field of study - a precondition for substantial, useful research" (Boote and Beile, 2005: 9)

Reading, summarizing and critiquing previous studies (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989)

Summarizing a previous study

- What are the major research questions or hypotheses in the study?
- What were the main findings of the study?
- Why was it important to carry out the research?
- What is the relationship between this study and the your own project?
- What other research studies were conducted in the same area?
- What is the relationship between these studies and your own project?

Summarizing research methods

- What research design was used in the study?
- What were the main variables in the study?
- What data was collected for the study?
- Describe the population, sample, and selection procedures for the sample
- Describe the data collection procedures used in the study
- How were the data collection procedures developed?
- Were issues of reliability and validity considered?

Analysis of the data

- How was the data analysed in the study?
- Were the analytic procedures quantitative, qualitative or both?
- Would you be able to re-analyse the data on the basis of the information provided about the analytic procedures?

Analysing findings

- What were the main findings of the study?
- How do the findings relate to previous research on the topic?
- What conclusions does the researcher reach on the basis of their findings?
- What are the implications of the findings?
- What recommendations does the researcher make based on the findings?
- What recommendations does the researcher draw from the results of their study?

Critiquing previous research

- Is the research problem clearly stated?
- Are the variables clearly described and defined?
- Is the design of the study appropriate for the particular research question?
- Are the research the instruments appropriate for the particular study?
- Are the data analysis procedures appropriate for the particular study?
- Was the author consistent in the way they analysed their results?
- Are the conclusions, implications, and recommendations warranted by the results?

Reporting on previous research

Central reporting

- Burke (1986) discovered that many students would like to become integrated into Australian society.

Non-central reporting

- It has been shown that students have often performed successfully in their own education system before they seek entry to the particular university (Ballard, 1991)

Non-reporting

- Instead of motivation producing achievement, it may be that achievement produces motivation (Spolsky 1989)

Typical tenses used in the literature review

Tense	Example
simple present	Brown (1989) <u>shows</u> that .... "
simple past	Brown (1989) <u>showed</u> that ...."
present perfect	Research <u>has shown</u> that ...."

Choices of tense and reasons for their use

Choice of tense	Reason
present simple	A generalisation is being made A reference is being made to the state of current knowledge Previous findings are being presented/are accepted as facts
simple past	A reference is being made to a single study A specific piece of research and its findings are being referred to
present perfect	A general area of investigation or inquiry is being referred to A general statement is made about previous research

Linguistic strategies for commenting on previous research (Hyland, 2004)

Strategy	Function	Examples
Hedges	To withhold the writer's full commitment to a proposition	Might/perhaps/possible/ about
Boosters	To emphasise force or the writer's certainly in a proposition	In fact/definitely/ it is clear that
Attitude markers	To express the writer's attitude towards a proposition	Unfortunately/I agree/ surprisingly
Engagement markers	To explicitly refer to or build a relationship with the reader	Consider/note that/you can see that
Self-mentions	To make explicit reference to the author/s	I/we/my/our

Techniques for paraphrasing and summary writing (Bailey, 2006)

Technique	Examples of the technique	Examples in a sentence
Changing the word	Change studies to research Change society to civilisation Change mud to deposits	Change Sleep scientists have found that traditional remedies for insomnia, such as counting sheep, are ineffective to Sleep researchers have found that established cures for insomnia, for instance counting sheep, do not work
Changing the word class	Change Egypt (noun) to Egyptian (adjective) Change Mountainous regions (adjective + noun) to in the mountains (noun)	Change A third group was given no special instructions about going to sleep to A third group was given was not specially instructed about going to sleep
Changing the word order	Change Ancient Egypt collapsed to the collapse of Egyptian society began	Change There are many practical application to research into insomnia to Research into insomnia has many practical applications

Useful resources
Websites

Getting started on your literature review. A useful overview for students in the early stages of thesis writing.
http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/litrev.html

Levine, S. J*. Writing and presenting your thesis or dissertation*. A comprehensive and accessible, easy to navigate site with a student focus, written by an experienced supervisor. The emphasis is on strategies that will help successful writing and completion.
http://www.learnerassociates.net/dissthes/

PhD web - first thoughts to finished writing. A highly-recommended website. Its comprehensive *Frequently Asked Questions* are an excellent resource for student and supervisor as are the sections on managing the different stages of the PhD. Good hyperlinks make the site easy to navigate.
http://www.sss.uq.edu.au/linkto/phdwriting/

Resources for postgraduates A useful portal with links to a wide range of online resources on topics such as 'What makes a good PhD', 'Choosing a research topic', 'Organising your ideas', and 'Managing your time'.
http://www.slc.auckland.ac.nz/resources/for_postgraduates/index.php

Books

Bailey, S. (2006) *Academic writing: A handbook for international students*, Abingdon: Routledge.

This book has chapters on many of the language issues second language students have difficulty with in academic writing such as paraphrasing, referencing, using referring verbs and the use of articles. Each section has exercises with an answer key for each of the exercises.

Hart, C. (1998)*. Doing a literature review. Releasing the social science research imagination*, London: Sage.

A key text that all students in the social sciences should be familiar with before starting their literature review.

Paltridge, B and S. Starfield. (2007)*. Thesis and dissertation writing in a second language*. London: Routledge.

Written primarily for supervisors working with second language students, this book covers the writing of each of the main chapters of a thesis, including the review of the literature.

Swales, J. and Feak, C. (2004) *Academic writing for graduate students: Essential tasks and skills*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

The second edition of this text aimed at non-native speakers writing at a postgraduate level is highly recommended. Its explicit and accessible focus on language and writing make it an essential item for students' bookshelves.

References

Boote, D.N. and P. Beile (2005). Scholars before researchers: On the centrality of the dissertation literature. *Educational Researcher*. 34, 6: 3-16.

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