

Book Review: The Literature Review: A Step by Step Guide for Students

by Blog Admin

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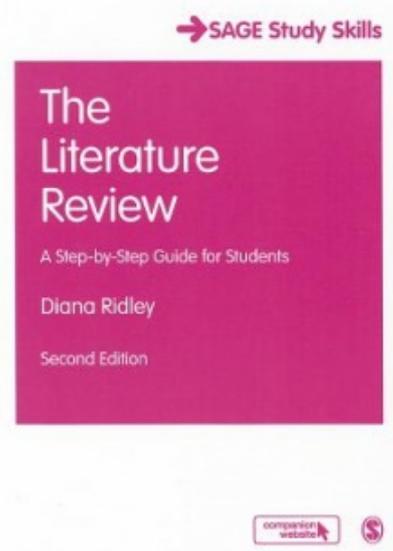
In this second edition of *The Literature Review*, **Diana Ridley** provides increased guidance on evaluating the quality of online sources, and discusses copyright and permissions issues alongside many cases and examples to demonstrate best practice. Ridley outlines practical strategies for conducting a systematic search of the available literature, reading and note taking and writing up a literature review as part of an undergraduate research project, Masters dissertation, or PhD thesis. **Matthew Wargent** finds that the book holds its own against the many offerings in the blogosphere.



The Literature Review: A Step by Step Guide for Students. Diana Ridley. July 2012. Sage.

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As part of Sage's extensive [Study Skills Series](#), the second edition of Diana Ridley's text aims to provide a comprehensive guide to the literature review process for university students of all levels. Books of this nature face a significant threat from the proliferation of blogs (and accompanying twitter communities) designed to aid all stages of the research process, particularly at doctoral level. For a long time I have resisted the temptation to read step by step guides, doubtful that they could contain any value above that which can be gleaned from reading good published research in my own field. However having been recently drawn into reading numerous academic blogs, now seems an appropriate time to find out how the published alternative compares.



There can be little doubt that Ridley is well placed to provide advice as her own PhD concerned the the role of the literature review process in postgraduate research. The book contains eleven well delineated chapters that are extensively summarised in the contents page, allowing for easy reference to specific topics. Mapping out your literature review is usually one of the first tasks in any research project and as Ridley attests, it is rarely finished until the project itself is completed. The first steps of a literature review are unquestionably a daunting prospect for any student and of central concern to many is developing a critical voice. Chapter 8 furnishes students with a slew of techniques to develop a critical mindset, in a straightforward and logical manner. 'Foregrounding your voice' is an essential skill for fledgling academics and Ridley demonstrates how this can be achieved via manipulation of citation patterns, strategic organisation of the text and employing personal pronouns – a stylistic choice which undergoes a considered discussion. Ridley argues that despite the use of the first person historically being considered sacrilege, the practice is becoming increasingly fashionable within the social sciences.

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Other chapters pay close attention to technological advances on offer to students, from the use of Boolean logic in Google Scholar searches to utilising tools such as CiteULike (and more besides: EndNote, RSS feeds, social bookmarking, Turnitin). The use of internet tools is well covered throughout; in fact this turns out to be one of the key strengths of the book. Academic blogs provide rolling coverage of all such tools so in order for texts of this nature to compete it is no longer the case that they can tag on a chapter devoted to the advent of new technologies as an afterthought. This analysis must now figure prominently throughout.

There are some portions of the book that could be filed under 'leaving no stone unturned'. Chapter 4 advises: 'avoid saying the words to yourself as you read' and 'do not run your finger under the lines as you read them' (p66). Such recommendations should be redundant in a text aimed at university students. At times this particular chapter, 'Reading and note-taking strategies' descends into such minutiae of the educational process that it can only be of interest to those pursuing an EdD. As a result some of the guidance found here is too simplistic to warrant inclusion, though it fair to say that this is an occupational hazard of providing an exhaustive text catering to all abilities.

The text extensively uses examples to facilitate understanding, with a number of students' theses used repeatedly throughout. In some chapters the examples far outweigh the text itself, however the continuity of these is an astute approach since the reader need not familiarise him or herself to the context each time. The final chapter contains concise reflexive descriptions of each contributor's experience and these prove emblematic of the text's accessibility, providing candid and illuminating snapshots of the overall process.

Ridley emphasises that conducting a literature review is not a linear enterprise, noting the "cyclical, continuous, and interconnected nature of the various processes involved" (p117) such as attempting to integrate the literature review into the wider research project. Even whilst it acts as the foundation of your research, it is not uncommon for the literature review to change and transform as you progress – for instance your findings can cause a significant shift in the focus of your review (p176). This recognition should be reassuring to students of all levels – academic writing is not a painless endeavour: it is complicated, demanding and rarely complete. Ridley's authoritative text assures the readership that you are allowed to find this process difficult – it is only in the drafting and redrafting of your literature review that your own arguments are forged and refined. Students should distill confidence from this advice and be encouraged to take ownership of their literature review and write with self-assurance.

The utility of this book will be dependent on your own level of experience. It will prove most useful for undergraduates but that is not to say that the text is devoid of value for those further down the academic career path. For some, this book will serve better as a reference text than a cover-to-cover read, allowing you to cherry-pick the advice offered when needed. As an example, Chapter 11 – new to this edition – could be read in isolation as it provides an insightful synopsis of how to conduct systematic literature reviews and considers their use in evidenced-based policy.

This is an accessible text that skilfully manages the difficult task of providing generic advice to students operating at different levels and in specific disciplines. The plethora of blogs that cover the academic process no doubt offer comparable advice, and whilst they offer community and interaction they can at times lack the authority of a published text that some students seek. As such Ridley's book continues to hold its own against the blogosphere, containing all relevant information in one place and in a uniform style. For students, every literature review is forged through the competing interests of your discipline's norms and style, your supervisor's advice, the literature itself and your own voice – to navigate this landscape successfully a certain confidence in your own writing is required, and Ridley's book might just provide that.

Matthew Wargent is a PhD student at the University of Sheffield where his ESRC funded research concerns the nature of democratic participation and political empowerment in the United Kingdom. You can follow him on twitter [@mattwargent](#). [Read more reviews by Matthew.](#)