SACSA Research Tip

By J. Michelle McDaniel  
SACSA Research Committee Member

Research Tip – Writing a Literature Review

Reviewing literature is essential to the quality of your research project. When writing a literature review, you should begin by describing the problem area. You may also establish the importance of the topic by providing statistics. Additionally, it is important to provide conceptual definitions of major terms, particularly if you believe your audience may not know the meanings.

The second step is to write a topic-by-topic description of relevant research. It is important to provide major and minor subheadings to guide readers through this section of your research. You should also include the results of cited research and not just give readers a description of the research methodology.

Patten (2005) has some additional suggestions for writing effective literature reviews:

1. Organize each paragraph around a topic, in which the first sentence of each paragraph is the topic sentence.
2. Group authors who have made the same point into a single reference citation.
3. When many authors have reported a common finding, use “e.g.” followed by just a sample of the authors.
4. When you have found an individual’s work that is both central and important to points made in your literature review, you should devote one or more paragraphs to describe this work.
5. Provide explicit definitions of important technical terms.
6. Consider quoting rather than paraphrasing a previously published definition to ensure the essence of the definition is not lost in the paraphrase.
7. Use quotations sparingly because they break the flow of the presentation. Remember quotations should be used to (1) present definitions, (2) present pertinent points made by distinguished individuals, and (3) to clarify for the reader the differences of opinion.
8. Transitional terms and phases should be used to help your readers understand the organization of the paragraph.
9. Use “first,” “second,” “last,” and so on, when a number of parallel points are discussed.
10. To present a brief list of items, use a letter for each item, for example: (a) for the first item and (b) for the second item.