

THE CRITICAL REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A Doctoral Framework for Thesis and Journal Publication

Doctoral Research Guidance Series (2026)

Prepared for DBA, Executive Master, and Ph.D. Candidates

Academic and Examination Branch

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1. NATURE & PURPOSE OF THE REVIEW

What is a Literature Review?

To the novice researcher, a literature review is commonly misunderstood as an annotated summary of past research a compilation of summaries outlining who wrote what. To a doctoral examiner, however, the literature review is a critically evaluated, synthesized thematic narrative that establishes the theoretical and empirical foundations of your entire study.

It must never manifest as a chronological list of disconnected citations (e.g., "Smith (2021) stated X, followed by Jones (2023) who discovered Y"). Instead, it represents a highly curated workspace where you orchestrate past academic discussions to build an undeniable case for why your specific study must be executed.

Purpose of a Literature Review

Your literature review is not a passive placeholder; it must actively drive the research architecture by serving four fundamental pillars:

Establish Context: It must definitively locate your research boundaries within the broader, pre-existing landscape of established academic literature and professional corporate knowledge.

Demonstrate Academic Command: It provides empirical proof to the evaluation board that you have thoroughly mastered the seminal theories, modern shifts, and unresolved debates governing your field.

Justify the Methodology: By examining how previous scholars measured similar operational variables or observed related phenomena, you build a rigorous justification for your own research design, tools, and analytical methods.

Identify the Research Gap: It systematically creates a logical funnel that demonstrates to the reader exactly where prior studies reached their limits, proving that your research question remains unanswered.

2. STRATEGY, APPROACHES & STRUCTURAL DESIGN

Different Approaches to Literature Reviews

Depending on your overarching research paradigm and problem statement, you must select an organizational methodology that best serves your objectives. Three main strategic archetypes dictate this structure:

Approach	Core Analytical Focus	Strategic Suitability
Thematic	Organizes literature dynamically by core themes, interactive variables, or central concepts.	Highly recommended for standard DBA/Ph.D. theses and high-impact journal articles.
Theoretical	Focuses strictly on competing, conflicting, or complementary foundational theories (e.g., Agency Theory vs. Stewardship Theory).	Best suited for purely conceptual papers, model development, or extensive qualitative inquiries.
Chronological	Traces the linear, temporal evolution of a specific management concept over a clearly defined historical timeline.	Appropriate for historical corporate analyses or tracking structural paradigm shifts across decades.

Examiner's Warning: *Avoid defaulting to a chronological approach unless your research is explicitly historical. Chronological structures almost invariably decay into passive, descriptive storytelling, which fails to satisfy doctoral-level criteria for critical synthesis.*

The Structure of a Literature Review

A structurally sound literature review follows an "Inverted Pyramid" or Funnel Approach, methodically filtering macro-concepts down into your exact, focused operational inquiry.



Introduction: Clearly outline the specific operational scope of the review. Explicitly state your search strategy, detailing databases utilized (e.g., Scopus, Web of Science), primary search strings, keyword combinations, and strict inclusion/exclusion criteria.

The Main Body (Thematic Blocks): Partition the literature into rigorous thematic segments. Ensure each section integrates perspectives seamlessly, contrasting different research findings rather than summarizing papers individually.

The Conceptual Framework: Conclude your review with a clear visual model or detailed mapping showing exactly how your variables or concepts are expected to interact based on your analysis of the literature.

3. CRITICAL ANALYSIS & IDENTIFICATION OF THE RESEARCH GAP

How to be Critical in a Literature Review

Criticality is the primary differentiator between postgraduate and doctoral performance. Being critical does not imply relentless negativity; rather, it requires an objective, analytical evaluation of the validity, reliability, and boundary conditions of existing knowledge claims.

The Progression of Critical Depth

Consider the following progression to understand the difference between descriptive and analytical writing:

Weak (Descriptive): "Al-Mansoori (2022) found that AI adoption increases employee turnover in UAE banks." (This simply echoes facts without interpretation).

Strong (Critical Analysis): "While Al-Mansoori (2022) explicitly links AI adoption to elevated turnover rates within the Middle Eastern banking sector, this conclusion is methodologically constrained by a cross-sectional design that fails to account for long-term organizational adaptation. Conversely, Chen et al. (2024) demonstrate that technological turnover spikes are fundamentally transitory—a crucial nuance overlooked by Al-Mansoori due to data collection occurring during peak operational disruption."

Literature Review and Research Gap

The core objective of your literature review is to expose and justify the research gap. If an explicit, unaddressed gap cannot be verified, your doctoral study lacks the foundation to proceed.

Primary Research Gaps for Modern Thesis Design:

Empirical Gap: A critical relationship, variable interaction, or operational phenomenon has been proposed but never rigorously verified in a real-world organizational setting.

Contextual/Geographic Gap: An established academic model heavily verified in Western developed markets is applied to an unexamined domain, such as emerging markets or small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs).

Methodological Gap: Existing literature relies almost exclusively on self-reported qualitative interviews; your study introduces an objective quantitative framework to evaluate if those findings hold true under statistical scrutiny.

Contradictory Findings Gap: School of Thought A proves that Variable X positively impacts Variable Y, while School of Thought B proves it causes a negative effect. Your study is designed to resolve this direct empirical conflict.

4. BEST PRACTICES & EXAMINER'S OF THE ABSTRACT CRITIQUE

Top Editorial Tips for Doctoral Candidates

Synthesize dynamically: Always deploy a comprehensive synthesis matrix during your reading phase to cluster authors into thematic camps before drafting paragraphs.

Enforce the 80/20 Rule for Recency: Secure at least 80% of your total citations from high-impact, peer-reviewed journal articles published within the last rolling five years (2021–2026). Dedicate the remaining 20% strictly to foundational, seminal theories.

Avoid Source Monopolization: If a single author's name repeatedly dominates consecutive pages, you have failed to write a literature review; you have merely summarized a monograph.

The Examiner's Desk: Comprehensive Critique of the Abstract

The abstract serves as an academic gatekeeper. A weak, poorly structured abstract immediately signals to an examiner that the underlying thesis likely lacks methodological and theoretical rigor.

EXAMPLE 1: THE WEAK ABSTRACT (DESCRIPTIVE & UNFOCUSED)

This study looks at how digital transformation impacts leadership styles in the logistics industry. Digital transformation is very important today and many companies are struggling with it. We did a survey of 150 managers in logistics companies to find out what they think about leadership. The data was analysed using SPSS software. The results showed that digital transformation changes how leaders manage their teams. It also showed that leaders need to communicate better online. This study is helpful for managers who want to improve their leadership skills in the future. Recommendations are provided at the end of the thesis.

Examiner's Critical Feedback:

- **Absence of Theoretical Architecture:** The abstract highlights 'leadership styles' but fails to mention any formal theory anchoring the analytical framework.
- **Flawed Problem Definition:** Stating that 'companies are struggling' identifies a common practical issue, not a clear academic research gap.
- **Colloquial Methodology:** Phrases like "to find out what they think" lack academic precision. Identifying software (SPSS) is also secondary to stating the actual statistical tests applied.
- **Superficial Findings:** Concluding that "leaders need to communicate better" is an intuitive assumption, not a rigorous doctoral-level discovery.

EXAMPLE 2: THE HIGH-QUALITY ABSTRACT (CRITICAL & RIGOROUS)

Drawing on Adaptive Structuration Theory, this study examines the impact of digital transformation on leadership efficacy within the logistics sector, resolving conflicting literature regarding digital oversight versus employee autonomy. A quantitative, cross-sectional design was deployed, collecting data from 210 senior operations managers across UK logistics firms. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) via SmartPLS 4 revealed that digital tracking systems negatively moderate the positive relationship between transformational leadership and employee engagement ($\beta = -0.34, p < 0.01$). This contradicts prevailing assumptions that real-time data access universally enhances waves of managerial control. The study contributes a novel 'Digital Autonomy Framework' to literature, offering DBA practitioners an empirical strategy to balance algorithmic management with leadership trust.

Examiner's Commendation:

- **Explicit Theoretical Anchoring:** The study immediately states its guiding conceptual framework (Adaptive Structuration Theory).
- **Targeted Research Gap:** It explicitly identifies and addresses an active conflict in the literature (digital oversight versus employee autonomy).
- **Methodological Rigor:** The text clearly presents the sample parameters, geographic focus, and advanced statistical methods used.
- **Quantifiable Empirical Results:** It provides exact statistical indices ($\beta = -0.34, p < 0.01$) that demonstrate precise variable relationships.
- **Clear Contribution:** It explicitly names the theoretical outcome (Digital Autonomy Framework) and explains its value for both academic theory and management practice.

5. SUMMARY

A high-quality literature review is a structured, critical argument that maps out the current state of knowledge, exposes a distinct flaw or omission (the gap), and positions your research as the definitive solution to that problem. Master this balance of theory, critique, and precision, and your study will comfortably satisfy the requirements of any international doctoral examination board.