Doing Development Research

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Literature Reviews and Bibliographic Searches

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When you're looking through the literature, what are you searching for? Where and how do you find appropriate sources? How do you analyse the literature once you have found it? How should the literature review be written up? How does the literature review link up with the rest of your project?

Introduction: why a good literature review matters

For many students embarking on develop-ment research, the literature review may at first sight seem to be 'the dull bit' and quite a daunting task. Early on in the research process, it seems to get in the way of more pressing practical issues (booking your flight to Honduras, learning which venomous snakes you're likely to come across in Kenya, etc.), and later on sifting through other people's research may seem far less important than writing up your own findings. Although this is understandable, the literature review is far more central to the whole research process than many students initially think. If we look at what makes a good literature review, we can see that it both provides some critical elements of your dissertation, and tests a number of key areas. If you can write a good review, you will have demonstrated a range of skills and competencies:

- You are a 'well read' student: you've got a good grounding in the relevant literature.
- You've got analytical skills: you can iden-tify key themes and offer constructive criticism of existing work.
- You can link 'library' (secondary sources) and 'field-based' work: you can demon-strate that your knowledge of the literature has informed your research questions, practice and analysis.
- You can communicate your ideas: you can outline and synthesize other people's work effectively, and provide your own clear commentary on their arguments and research questions.

In most universities, these skills and competencies will feed directly through to the grade your research project will receive. This probably gives you an immediate incentive to get the literature review right (!), but beyond this, writing a good review is an important part of stating your credentials as a researcher. These are all also issues of quite subtle judgement, which can make them difficult for students to grasp what they might actually mean in practice. In this chapter, we therefore ground our discussion in our own recent work: Paula's research on women's strategies for dealing with violence in informal settlements in Durban, South Africa, and Glyn's work on participatory development in rural eastern India. Take a look at the five questions at the start of this chapter. We now address these in turn.

When you're looking through the literature, what are you searching for?

Before you plunge headlong into the library, ask yourself this important question. The answer may seem obvious. If your research topic is 'Who benefits from government participatory development programmes in rural West Bengal?' you need to find material relevant to that. But relevant in what ways? Material on rural West Bengal will be important, so too will literature on participatory development more generally. Also useful is literature on how other people have researched similar topics. So looking for information on your *case study area*, your *research themes* and your *methodology and theoretical approach* are all important generic areas that any good literature review should cover. But given that you have got to demonstrate 'a good grounding' in the relevant literature, how do you know whether you've read widely enough, or in sufficient depth? One

idea is to produce a 'literature map' that lays out the themes of your research: as you read individual articles or chapters, include these on the map and trace your own progress with your review. We've produced one here (Figure 22.1) based around Paula's work, her central research concern being 'An analysis of violence in informal settlements in Durban'.

This is how the map works. At the centre is the research topic and around that are a series of 'sectors', each being a different theme relating to it. So, for Paula's work, these include themes of *gendered power relations*, *institutional failure, strategies to manage violence*, *causes of violence* and (because she wants to spend her time using solicited diaries with women in Durban) *qualitative methods*. The choice of sectors may not be obvious at first, and will evolve as your research progresses (as you read more, new themes will emerge, and old ones disappear!), but it is important in helping you to identify themes. Your search should then move you 'outwards' along each sector (so you are looking for the underlying links to wider theoretical debates), and also inwards (so that you look for links to specific case studies).

To take the *gendered power relations* theme as an example, the literature closest in towards the centre of the diagram may be on experiences of domestic violence in Durban and other South African cities. The literature at the outer edge will address broader issues of how we *think* about questions of gender and power, by examining theoretical literature on masculinity. This may well be 'distant' from Durban in terms of the areas studied, but relevant in that it is thematically linked, and investigates relevant theoretical debates.[1] It may well take you out towards the boundaries of academic disciplines – in this case from 'mainstream' development studies to social geography – but with the support and guidance of your supervisor, this can be a useful exercise.
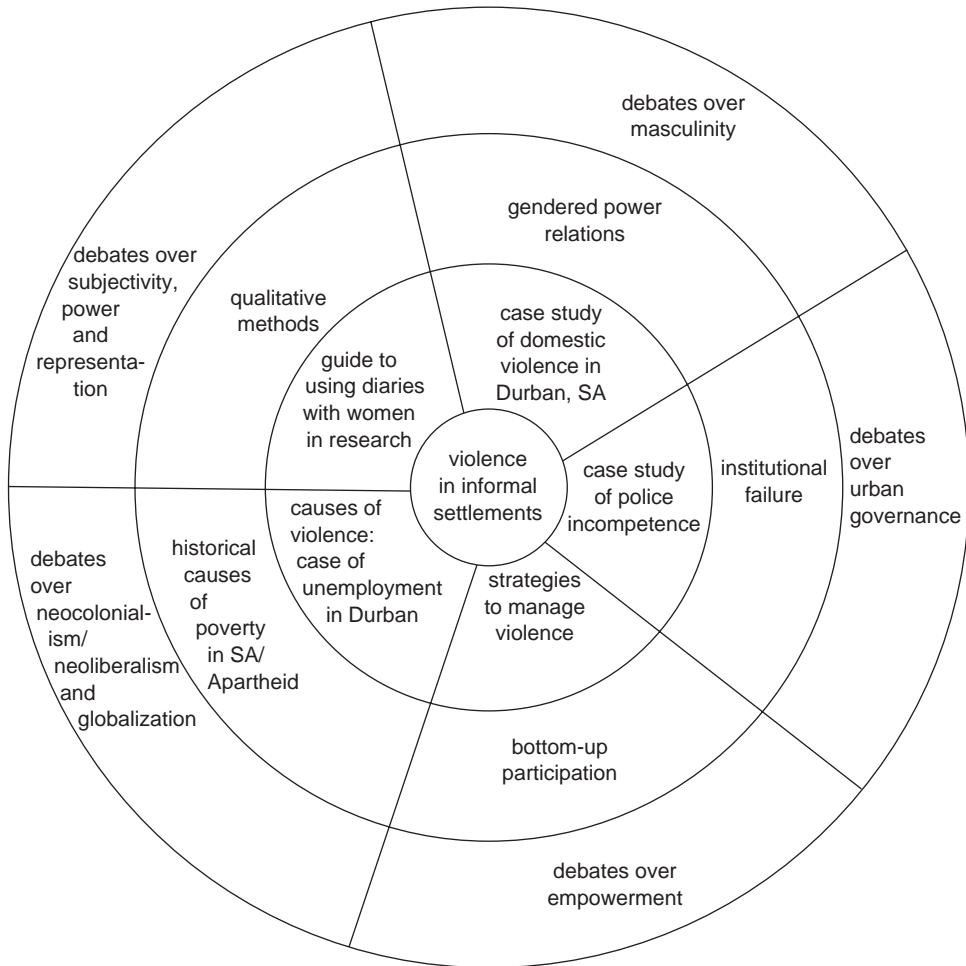
Figure 22.1 A literature 'map'

A good literature review, then, will be looking for a collection of sources that fill out this map in some detail. Clearly defining themes for each sector is important, otherwise your search won't be sufficiently focused. But it's equally important to get a balance between the context-specific materials (knowing about your case-study area) and the thematic/ theoretical literature (knowing about key debates and approaches to your theme).

Where and how do you find appropriate sources?

Now you know what you're looking for from the literature, where do you actually get hold of your sources? Rather than trying to provide you with a list of key journals or websites, it's more useful here to think about what you actually *do* when you are looking for literature. Table 22.1 lists a range of searching strategies (which is far

Table 22.1   Searching strategies

Searching strategy	How you do it	Things to think about
Electronic library catalogues	Use title, key word and author searches to maximize the potential of the catalogue	Lets you know what is actually available on site (thus saving frustration later!) but most won't find chapters within books, or articles within journals
Electronic bibliographic databases e.g. IBSS via BIDS; ASSIA; and GEOBASE (see your library website)	Choose key words, author or title to describe your research, and then use the site's own search engine	Will be up to date but requires careful selection of key words.[2] Many won't find book chapters! Many of the citations are often book reviews – also a useful source
Back issues of relevant journals[3]	Trawl through recent back issues – manually or electronically. Some journals have annual index inserts that list a whole year's collection (saving you a lot of time)	Time-consuming (so skim-read abstracts) but gives an overview of current debates. As well as articles, many journals have editorial commentaries and book reviews
Key authors' websites	Enter author's name (and academic institution) into Google to find their personal site, then look for lists of publications	Provides detailed insight to an individual author's work (and research group[4]) – and will include all forms of publication (books, papers, etc.)
Bibliographies of existing sources	Make active use of bibliographies while reading – note relevant case studies, areas of debates, key authors, etc.	Will provide references only to *earlier* work, so may need updating through other methods
Websites of development agencies (World Bank, DfID, UNDP, etc.). See also Mawdsley in this volume	Find key institutions' websites on Google or via links pages, e.g. that of the Developing Areas Research Group (http://www.gg.rhul.ac.uk/DARG/)	Ease of access *within* websites can be variable, but can reveal material (up-to-date data, reports and analysis) not yet in the academic domain

from exhaustive). Each of these has its own advantages and disadvantages, but all are much more effective when used *in combination*.

For example, Box 22.1 shows how a search on Glyn's topic, 'participatory development in India', might proceed.

Box 22.1   Undertaking a literature search

A paper your lecturer recommended cites a journal article by Giles Mohan on partici-pation. So, you note it down and use Google to find him on the Web. His publications list (http://dpp.open.ac.uk/publications.htm#gmohan) includes a book chapter in an edited collection, *Participation: the New Tyranny*? This didn't show up in an earlier search on BIDS, but typing keywords from the title back into BIDS provides you with a couple of reviews of the book in development journals. The book looks spot on, so you get it out of the library, and flick through the bibliography which generates a range of possible leads, including a really important-looking journal you'd not previously been aware of, *Development in Practice*. You find this and photocopy a paper by Sarah White (noting this as a name to chase up on the Web later), but you're worried that so far you have not found much that is India-specific. So, you change tack, and try a simple Google search: 'India NGOs Participation'. Among others, this throws up a web portal, Serve India Forum (http://www.serveindiaforum.net/links.html), where two websites run by the World Bank (http://www.worldbank.org/participation) and the British Council (www.indev.org) catch your eye. These are recognized organizations and the sites provide a range of reports and other useful information.

Searching is an iterative process and the strategies above need to be used flexibly and with imagination. If you do this, there should be no problem in generating what quickly becomes a *massive* reading list (but be warned that this can also very quickly become over–whelming). It should also make the process of collecting sources active – shuttling between websites, catalogues, library shelves,[5] and photocopiers – rather than plodding through a book from cover to cover. A key tip here is to keep a full list of references as you come across them (including, most importantly, date, page numbers, place of publication and publishing details). Struggling to find details about various references on the morning of your hand–in date causes unnecessary anxiety!

So much for the mechanics of searching, but hiding within this question is another more subtle one – what makes a source *appro-priate*? Sometimes students' dissertations get low marks for 'overuse of the web', or 'using out–dated sources'. To avoid this, it is impor-tant to return to the question of what you are searching for. Start by thinking carefully about the limitations of the sources themselves – just because it's in print (or on the Web) doesn't mean it's perfect for your needs. As Table 22.2 shows, thinking carefully about the quality of each source is important.

Going back to our literature map, most of your web–based materials may be filling in the case–study specific detail near the centre, whereas the academic journals will tend to dominate the theoretical debates towards the edges. Although we cannot give an absolute number of journal articles and other materials you should have found and read, it is impor-tant that each of your 'sectors' is well developed with reference to the *academic* liter-ature. If a key theme is covered only by web materials, think carefully about why, and discuss this with your supervisor and/or get searching again. Often the reason for an apparent lack of academic sources is that you haven't thought widely enough about which broader field of literature your topic is located within. Students often say that 'there is absolutely

Table 22.2 Evaluating the appropriateness of different sources

Key attributes	Web-based sources	Academic textbooks	Academic journal articles
Reliability/ authenticity of information	Very varied! The institution hosting the website may provide some guarantee, but very careful judgement is required	'Quality controlled' – have been reviewed by other academics (but you can and should think critically about content!)	Excellent – have been through a thorough refereeing process (but you can and should think critically about content!)
Linkages to theoretical debates	Varied – but most will *not* be written from an academic standpoint	Varied depending on the author, some are more explicit than others. Most make useful references to related literature	Good – linkages to wider theoretical debates generally explicit (and referenced)
Breadth of coverage	Generally good – you will be likely to find *something* on your study area and research question	Usually excellent in providing an overview of issues, historical backgrounds and generalized cover	Weaker – there may well be no coverage of your study area/precise themes
Coverage of current events	Good – but make sure you check websites for details of when they were last updated	Often the most out of date (depending on date of publication)	Usually worse than websites, but generally more up to date than academic books. Check carefully for dates of fieldwork/data collection

nothing academic written on my topic': generally, there *is*, it is just written on related research themes or theoretical debates rather than their particular case study! So, be prepared to think laterally.

How do you analyse the literature once you have found it?

Analysing the literature you have found is a gradual process and needs patience. Knowing what to focus on in your sources (i.e. knowing what you are going to analyse) depends entirely on what you are trying to argue in your dissertation. So, at this stage remind your-self of what your original research questions were: remember that after you have carried out any primary or secondary research, both your main research questions and thus the focus of your literature review may have changed. This is not a bad thing! Just remember to check that the key debates you have focused on actually relate to your new questions.

Analysis itself is about reading the literature *selectively* but also about reading it *critically*. Reading critically is often a major worry for students, as they think that to read critically means to 'criticize', that is to say something negative about a particular reading. This is not true! Evaluations can be very positive. Reading critically simply means that you are expected to evaluate and interpret what you are reading rather than simply accepting it as 'the truth'. To achieve this you need to read material with some 'critical' questions in mind. We have outlined some possible questions you might ask, but this is not an exhaustive list (see Hart, 1998: Chapter 3 for further advice on classifying and reading research).

1. What is the key focus and argument of the document?
2. What particular audience was it written for (and has this affected its argument)?
3. What conceptual framework does it use (neoliberal, anti-development, feminist, etc.) and how has this shaped the author's argument?
4. What methods has the author used and are they appropriate?
5. Has the author provided evidence to back up the claims made?
6. What issues has the author overlooked, for example gender differences, an historical perspective, questions of politics and culture, etc.?

Once you have read a number of different sources – and thought about them – the next step is to bring these together under different themes. The best way to choose the themes you want to use is to go back to your original literature map on which these appear as different slices or segments. Treat each little theme as a mini-essay in itself and aim to discuss each using the sources you have found. In Paula's work *gendered power relations* is a key theme on her literature map that has generated a lot of reading material: discussion of this may include sources on masculinity, domestic violence and power relations between men and women. This needs to be drawn together through a critical review that shows its relevance to the Durban case study. The key point here is that your literature review should be structured thematically (not around individual articles) and be linked back to your central research question. This takes us on to the specifics of writing a literature review.

How should the literature review be written up?

Writing up a literature review is *NOT* about summarizing and describing the points made by each author you have read. Instead, your review should be a coherent argument where you interpret (i.e. analyse) the arguments of others. You have an important role in synthesizing different people's work on a particular theme and by doing this, you are 'adding value' to this work by presenting it in a new light (for help on developing your own arguments, see Holloway and Valentine, 2001). Writing a good review is therefore quite a specific skill. You need to demonstrate your familiarity with work in your field of study, but without regurgitating a list of point-by-point summaries of individual authors' articles or chapters. Turning to research papers published in your field can give you an idea of the style and content of a good review, as Box 22.2 indicates.

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Box 22.2   Learning from published papers

Take an article in any development studies or other journal that is relevant to your research topic, and skim-read it for its structure. Many papers take the general form 'literature review, presentation of original fieldwork, conclusions'. Two of our recent papers that fit this format contain literature reviews on participation (Williams et al., 2003) and the home and violence (Meth, 2003). These are likely to provide a good model for your own review, and will also be useful in demonstrating how to make the links between the literature you are reading and the field materials you eventually collect (see below). Focus on the literature review. Note the following:

(Continued)

(Continued)

- In what ways is other literature discussed? (Referencing and citation style, level of detail)
- What is the balance between quotations/summaries of other work and the author's own words? (The latter should dominate – in your own review too)
- How does the review identify key debates and develop its own argument? (Your literature review map should help you in developing yours)

To show you how these writing tips work in practice, Box 22.3 presents two examples of literature reviews – one bad and one good – based around themes in Glyn's research.

These are of course only excerpts, but they show that your writing style and structuring are very important. Student A had found some good sources, and read

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Box 22.3 Good and bad literature reviews

Student A

A lot has been written on participation, which is an important theme in development. Robert Chambers (1997) has said that participation should help 'to put the first last' within development. This means that participation should include the views of the poorest within development programmes, and not just those of 'experts'. This review addresses a number of different authors' work on participation.

> This introduction is a bit dull, and more importantly, there's no indication of the themes that will be addressed, or how the review is structured

David Mosse (2000) writes about a rural development project in eastern India. In this project (the Western Indian Rainfed Farming Project), an NGO aimed to use participatory methods to include the views of the community within the running and management of this project. Mosse says that this did not fully work, as the project coordinators already had their own ideas about the goods and services they would provide villagers with.

> This (and the other references) are really good papers, but these are *described* without critical commentary

Another example of participatory development in India is described by Jenkins and Goetz (1999). They discuss the role of the MKSS, which fights for the right to information about government programmes in Rajasthan. Here the NGO works by publicizing the accounts of government development programmes, and holding public meetings where the actions of government officials can be criticized.

> Here and elsewhere there is no linkage between individual paragraphs. The result is a list of papers rather than a critical review

Heller (2001) discusses the involvement of people in local government planning in Kerala…

(Continued)

(Continued)

A link forward to the student's fieldwork that will follow – good practice

Subheadings – each dealing with a separate theme – can help you to structure your review

Use footnotes like this one to link to more generic literature, or make other points that are related, but not central, to your main argument

Student B

Although seen as an essential part of 'good' development practice by its promoters, participation has recently come in for much academic criticism. This review addresses three elements of this criticism that are particularly relevant to this dissertation's West Bengal case study: misunderstandings around the engagement of 'communities', the problems of PRA methods, and biases introduced by donor agencies.

Short but good introduction – shows that the student is structuring this review around his own themes

Engagement of Communities

Various authors have noted that careful attention needs to be paid to existing power-differences at the micro-level when engaging 'communities' in participatory development (Nelson and Wright, 1995; Guijt and Shah, 1998; Cleaver, 2001). Participation does not usually take place within a closed, homogeneous local space (Mohan and Stokke, 2000), and if these power differences are ignored, they can undermine attempts to 'put the first last' (Chambers, 1997). Gender is an important component of these power differences[1], and gender roles can lead to the silencing of women in participatory events (Guijt and Shah, 1998; Mosse 1994), and the misrepresentation of community needs.

Clear indication that the student has read a range of supporting material – you don't always need to discuss all of this in detail

[1]For a wider discussion of the evolution of approaches to gender within development studies, see Peet and Hartwick (1999, Chapter 4).

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and understood them too, but his write-up let him down by not demonstrating the skills of critically reviewing work or structuring the review clearly. Bringing in your own analysis and commentary on what you have read will ensure you get credit for all this effort!

How does the literature review link up with the rest of your project?

Ideally, your literature review should not be a stand-alone essay tacked on to the beginning of your project. Rather, the thinking within it
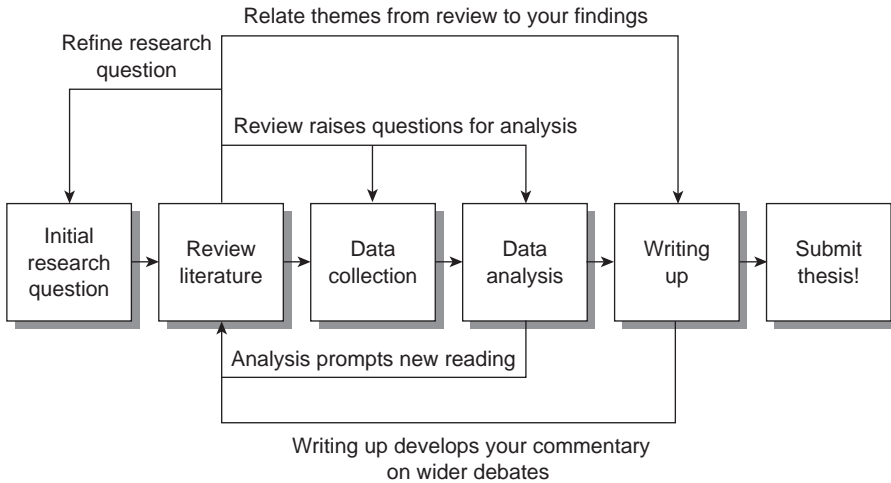
Figure 22.2   Linking up your literature review

should be taken up throughout your dissertation. Figure 22.2 shows some of the stages all research projects go through, and there should be strong links between all of these and your literature review.

The 'good' review example in Box 22.3 gives one example of how these links can be made – you link 'forward' from the literature review to the particular research questions, which you then address in the main part of the project. This is one important way in which your literature review can be made to work for you: you use the review to identify gaps in the literature, or interesting questions or approaches that you then address/put into practice through your own fieldwork or other data collection.

Importantly, the links here don't just go 'forward' from the literature to your questions and data collection, but 'backward' too: your data collection can suggest new avenues of enquiry, which should themselves be linked back to the literature (perhaps involving more reading). One way of dealing with these multiple links is to return to the map of the literature review and to annotate this further with themes and ideas emerging from your data analysis (Figure 22.3).

Here, Paula's literature map has evolved *after* her fieldwork in Durban. The theme of 'spirituality and culture' has been added to the sector on strategies to manage violence. This late addition occurred because the use of witchdoctors, who 'solve' crimes by using their powers to determine who the criminals are, emerged as an issue during focus group interviews. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this theme was not even thought of before carrying out empirical research, so no reading was done on it! But because it emerged as an issue that she wants to use in her research, Paula has to go back and find relevant literature to support any discussion she wants to make. Keeping and updating your literature map like this throughout the writing-up process should make sure that your literature review and data analysis are well connected throughout.

As with the literature review itself, it is important to *demonstrate* the linkages you are making through your writing style. For example, in your data analysis chapters you can make explicit links back to the literature you have already reviewed. In Glyn's work, this might be a statement like: 'In contrast to Mosse's (1999) work in Rajasthan, 81 per cent of villagers in the study area felt that they were free to participate in village meetings…'. Even more importantly, your *conclusions* should link directly back to your
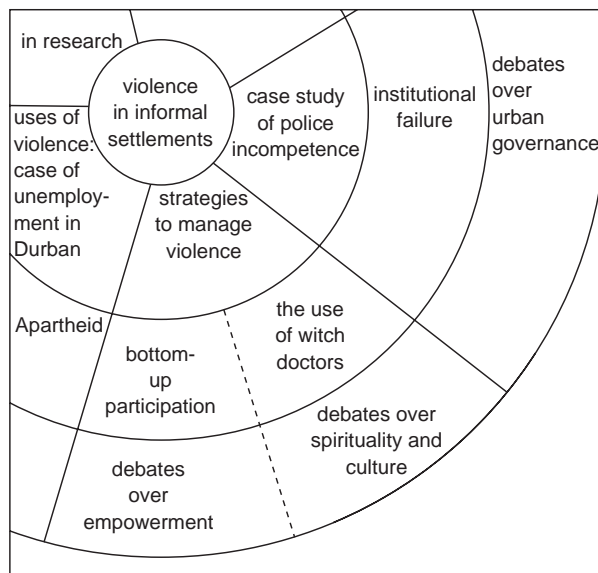
Figure 22.3   Revising your literature map

literature review. It is vital that you do this so that you can demonstrate that your own research project has identified issues that are relevant to wider academic debate within this area of study. This can make the difference between a good and an excellent project. Rather than being just a study of a few villagers in West Bengal, or a handful of township dwellers in Durban, you are showing that your study has something interesting or challenging to say about definitions of participatory development, or ideas of gender and violence. By being *informed by* and *linking to* a wider literature, you are showing all the key skills of a good researcher with which we began the chapter.

So, hopefully we've given you some insights here. And made it clear that spending time in the library is just as important for your research project as getting that aeroplane ticket booked …

Notes

1. Paula's review included looking at work on violence in North American/European cities

as this raised important theoretical points. Generally, there shouldn't be a 'Third World'/ 'First World' divide in your reading, but when you are using ideas developed in other contexts, think through how they might apply (or not!) in your own field area.

2. For example, entering the keyword 'violence' will yield different literature, as when using the keyword 'crime'. Be patient and try a range of combinations and synonyms.

3. 'Relevant to what?' is a key question here. These could be 'core' development journals (e.g. *Third World Quarterly*), region-specific journals (e.g. *Modern Asian Studies*, etc.) or those conceptually linked to a particular sub-discipline/theme (e.g. *Gender, Place and Culture*). Discussion with your supervisor should help here.

4. Research groups sometimes have useful web pages and electronic publications, for example, on participation see the IDS participation group's home page (http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/particip/index.html)

5. Important tip: Don't be limited by your own institution's resources here! Visits to specialist collections (e.g. the School of Oriental and African Studies library in London) or neighbouring universities can vastly improve your access, as can inter-library loans. Ask your librarian about these.

Further reading

Hart, C. (1998) *Doing a Literature Review*, London: Sage.

Hay, I. (1995) 'Writing a review', *Journal of Geography in Higher Education,* 19: 357–363.

Holloway, S. and Valentine, G. (2001) Making an argument: writing up human geography projects, *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 25(1): 127–132.

Rudestam, K.E. and Newton, R.R. (1992) *Surviving Your Dissertation: A Comprehensive Guide to Content and Process*, London: Sage (Chapter 4 in particular).

Websites

Serve India Forum: http://www.serveindiaforum.net/links.html
The World Bank: http://www.worldbank.org/participation
The British Council: www.indev.org
The Institute of Development Studies (Sussex University) Participation Group: http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/particip/index.html
The Developing Areas Research Group of the Royal Geographical Society/Institute of British Geographers: http://www.gg.rhul.ac.uk/DARG

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