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Book Review

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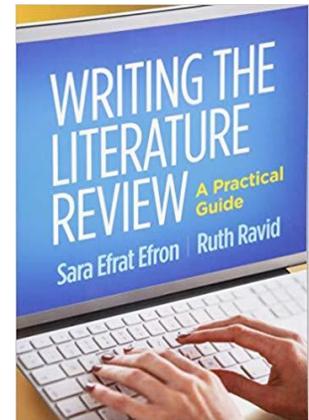
Book Review

Efron, S. E. & Ravid, R. (2019). *Writing the literature review: A practical guide*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press. 298 Pages.

Reviewed by Meenakshi Mohan, EdD
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Introduction

Sometimes, wishful thinking comes too late in life. I could have claimed my wishful thinking for this book back then—first, when I was a doctoral student, ready to embark on my journey of dissertation writing, quite disillusioned by the jargons of the research writing techniques; and second, a few years later, as an instructor teaching a research course for Roosevelt University in Chicago with little information to back up my teaching. This easy-to-read, user-friendly book with step-by-step guides would have made an excellent companion for my experiences, both as a research writer and as an instructor. Literature review writing could be a daunting experience for researchers: How to choose a topic? How to form research questions? Which methodology to use? How to skim through the plethora of information? These are only some challenging issues, but they are quite intimidating for researchers, specially the new ones. Sara Efrat Efron and Ruth Ravid, both pioneers in the field of research, have weaved the whole process of literature-review writing in simple steps through their book, *Writing the Literature Review: A Practical Guide*. In the opening passage in the preface, Efron and Ravid comment:



This book was born out of witnessing some of our students' frustrations as they were struggling to develop a literature review. These students told us that in the past they were provided with limited guidance on the different steps involved in developing such a review. Writing literature review is indeed a complex and challenging project, consisting of many demanding tasks. It requires the skills of identifying a topic and locating, analyzing, criticizing, and linking scholarly works into a meaningful and coherent whole. (p. v).

Linnea Rademaker commented (2013 p. 1) on Efron and Ravid's previous book, *Action Research in Education*, that Ravid as a quantitative expert and Efron as a qualitative expert, together use their

strengths to provide a much-needed melding of the two approaches, which is true for this book also. Joyce Pittman in her review of this book writes that it is the only book on the topic that connects the review to different research designs (2019, back cover). Efron and Ravid's book *Writing The Literature Review* is unlike any other book. It is more like a road map with a step-by-step guide for its readers on their voyage of research writing. The authors have structured this book based on Bloom's taxonomy of hierarchical models, going from basic questions of choosing a research topic to more complex issues of forming research questions, skimming through the related research, choosing methodologies appropriate for specific research, and to the final draft. "What's Next," at the end of each chapter keeps its readers motivated with an "I can do it!" spirit.

Analysis and Discussion

This twelve-chaptered book quenches researchers' questions in every stage of their literature-review writing process. Research instructors could easily organize their classes around the chapters with class discussions, sample writings, brainstorming sessions, and group work. Most students in a research class have some ideas of what they feel most passionate about. The chapter on "What is a Literature Review?" helps them focus on their topic of interest. Efron and Ravid comment:

The development of the literature review begins by selecting a topic of investigation that is meaningful for you and for your field. You will probably need to narrow down or broaden your topic by considering your purpose, your audience, and constraints such as time and access. The focus of your research should be stated as a well-defined question in order to create a researchable and manageable topic. (p.6).

Efron and Ravid have made the literature review writing process more accessible to researchers by guiding them through vignettes, easy to follow suggestions, and real-life experiences of other researchers. In the beginning stage of literature review writing process, researchers would greatly benefit from their suggestions for "Creating a Plan of Action."

As I was reading this book, I kept thinking that writing a literature review is like a puzzle with many scattered pieces but with appropriate modes of action: each element finds its own position, and concludes the research into a whole. I found the chapter on "Locating and Organizing Research Sources" of particular interest to researchers. Efron and Ravid comment:

At this point, you have selected your topic, considered its significance, and formulated your research question . . . your question may evolve and change as you immerse yourself in the reading process. Now you are ready to search for appropriate articles, books, reports, and other sources that will serve as the basis for your literature review. This search should be a systematic, meticulous, careful, and thoughtful process. Searching the literature can start with an initial, general idea about your topic of interest, continue when

you sharpen the focus of your study, and conclude when you finalize writing the literature review. (p. 57).

At this stage, the researchers have to start focusing on the topic of their interest, narrow down their search from the plethora of information out there. The diagrams on organizing library research (p. 58, figure 4.1) would be of great help to students. The chapter on “Selecting, Analyzing and Keeping Notes of Sources” is an excellent guide for students, especially those who are novice researchers. The diagrams (p. 91 and p. 92) classify how easily they can keep track of their research resources and focus more on what would be the topic of their interest.

Efron and Ravid point out:

While you want to assess the quality of all the sources that are part of your literature review, we suggest that the detailed evaluation of articles be done mostly for those studies that are critical for your own review and have a central role in planning your future research. (p. 95).

The chapter on “Evaluating Research Articles” would help researchers define a good research article from the elements given in the book. The examples of different types of methodologies help researchers find the “best fit” for their topic of interest. I found part of chapter six, on “Hermeneutic-Phenomenological” research a bit heavy in words and grammar. In chapter seven the charts on “Synthesis Matrix” were a little confusing too, however, the authors have simplified these issues at the end of the chapters in the chapter summary.

“The Writer Voice and the Writing Process” intrigued me a lot—after all, it is the researchers’ work. This chapter expands on the idea of how researchers can assert themselves as writers. Efron and Ravid quoted L. Richardson’s view that “no matter how we stage the text, we (the literature review writers) are doing the staging.” (p. 207). They emphasize that the authorial presence of the writer is very important in shaping the style and stance of their work. They further comment:

. . . you make a transition from being a student to becoming a scholar and recognize your potential contribution to further the knowledge in your field. . . . Your writer voice reflects the way you bring together and incorporate the perspectives of the authors you review and your own viewpoints . . . your choice mirrors how you orient yourself as a writer toward knowledge and toward the literature you review. (p. 208).

Conclusion

The literature review is an important ingredient of research writing because it provides a rationale for the research. This journey of writing the literature review could be cumbersome, overwhelming, and tiring for

researchers; however, Efron and Ravid like trailblazers and guides, have mapped out the whole process of research writing in easy steps in their book *Writing the Literature Review*—making it easier and more comprehensible for researchers. They have defined parameters of each and every step of the journey. From finding the research topic, to defining the scope of literature review, to writing research questions, choosing appropriate methodology, and finally synthesizing the whole study, and giving the author voice, these steps are clearly explained through diagrams, vignettes, and anecdotes. The dialogue-style

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conversation integrated inside the text with the use of the “you” pronoun is a welcoming gesture for researchers—they feel as if they are getting one-to-one mentorship through their journey of literature-review and research writing. There is an abundance of information out there on literature review writing, but Efron and Ravid’s book *Writing the Literature Review* is more distinct and conspicuous from the rest because of the simplicity with which this book is developed. I would highly recommend this easy-to-read book to all the instructors who teach Research Writing courses, and to all the graduate and doctoral students who are venturing out on their journey of the literature review writing processes. *Writing the Literature Review: A Practical Guide* is definitely textbook material, and a *lire absolutum*—a must read for all those who are interested in any kind of research. Stephanie Jones (2019, back cover) comments, “This is exactly the book my colleagues and I have been looking for. . . . Using this book will enable students to produce more rigorous and informed literature reviews.”

Sara Efrat Efron is a professor of education, and director of the doctoral program in curriculum, advocacy and policy at National Louis University. She has published numerous book chapters and journal articles, including several foreign-language instruction books for middle- and high-school students. Ruth Ravid is professor emerita of education at National Louis University. Dr. Ravid has authored and edited eight books and numerous journal articles and book chapters. Drs. Efron and Ravid coauthored a guidebook, *Action Research in Education*. *Writing the Literature Review* is their second book together as coauthors.

Dr. Meenakshi Mohan is an educator, freelance writer, art critic, book reviewer, children’s writer, and painter. She has taught at universities including Roosevelt University and National Louis University, both in Chicago; Wheelock College in Boston; and Towson University in Maryland. She has been listed twice in Who’s Who Among America’s Teachers. She is currently on the advisory committee of the Montgomery County Library System in its Potomac, Maryland, branch. Her articles are published on a regular basis in several journals, including Confluence UK and i.e.: inquiry in education. She has published a children’s book, The Gift, and edited and published Tamam Shud: Poems in English, Hindi, Urdu by Kshitij Mohan. She recently had a solo exhibit of her paintings in Maryland. Most of her paintings are in private collections.

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