Doing a literature review:
Using your working bibliography to structure a literature review

What is a literature review?
The literature review conveys to your reader the existing knowledge and ideas on your research topic, and the strengths and weaknesses of these texts / experiments / studies. Your literature review should be clearly organised in response to the focus of your research (your aims, question or argument). It should not just be a descriptive list or a set of summaries, but an evaluation of the scholarship already produced that provides a context to your writing.

Even if little has been written about your specific topic of research, the literature review establishes how and why the gap you are filling may exist and the comparability of other studies.

What a literature review can demonstrate
• Places the topic in a historical perspective
• Identifies key landmark studies through selection of key sources and authors
• Establishes context for your interest
• Distinguishes what has already been done to identify reasons for your own work

Key features of a literature review:

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<th>Breadth</th>
<th>Rigour</th>
<th>Clarity</th>
<th>Effective analysis</th>
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<td>Depth</td>
<td>Consistency</td>
<td>Brevity</td>
<td>Effective synthesis</td>
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Questions a literature review can answer

1. What are the key sources?
2. What are the key concepts, theories and ideas?
3. What are the epistemological* and ontological* grounds for the discipline?
4. What are the main questions and problems that have been addressed to date?
5. How is knowledge on the topic structured and organised?
6. What are the origins and definitions of the topic?
7. What are the political standpoints?
8. What are the major issues and debates about the topic?

How do approaches to these questions increase our understanding and knowledge?

* EPISTEMOLOGY – the branch of philosophy that deals with the nature, origin and scope of knowledge
* ONTOLOGY – the study of being/existence

Two possible ways of organising your literature review:
- Historical developments to the present
- Thematically – is your work interdisciplinary? Do you need to discuss how you focused on your chosen topic and how this demonstrates where you research will fit into the existing scholarship?

Working bibliography to literature review
As you focus on your topic, you will develop a ‘working bibliography’: an on-going list of sources you consult. By including some additional information with your bibliographic records, this can help you write your literature review:

- How did I find this source? (Was it discussed or referenced in another source? Did my tutor/supervisor recommend it to me?)
- Summarise what was in it - approx. 5 keywords/themes
- Was it useful? What were its key/best features (a good glossary of terms, illustrations, case studies, historical context)? What are its limitations (out-of-date, limited practical examples or case studies, bias, narrow focus/too broad)?