

# What is the difference between a literature review and a theoretical framework?

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What goes  
where?



Not all the literature you  
read belongs in your  
literature review.

Not all the theory you  
read belongs in your  
theoretical framework.


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# Introduction

- the broader problem or issue motivating your study (= the question to which you hope to make some contribution)
- your research questions (= the more specific questions your thesis or dissertation will seek to answer)
- overview of the remaining chapters



## Literature review

- how your research relates to, builds on, but is different from what we already know about your topic
- where your study is located in the field(s) of scholarship/practice
- context for your study

## Theoretical framework

- the theoretical perspective(s) informing the central concepts in your research questions
- what conceptions of the concepts you are using
- whose work has informed these particular conceptions



## Methodology

- how you will go about answering your research questions
- the specific method(s) and instrument(s) you will use
- the paradigmatic and epistemological assumptions underpinning this research approach



- what you found
- how your theoretical framework informed your data analysis
- how the findings answer your research questions

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Conclusion

- summary of contribution to the scholarly field(s) and/or practice
- limitations of the study
- areas for further research

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A thesis is  
often like a  
funnel...



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starting more broadly with  
what is already happening in  
the field



narrowing down to your  
specific study

## Example 1

My main research question is: What conceptions of the “good teacher” are evident in the recertification trajectory of IET participants in this study, and how do these open up or close down spaces for IETs to bring their experiences and voices to bear on reconstructing their professional identity in Canada? This question can be broken down into a set of sub-questions:

1. What different players do IETs encounter in the recertification process in BC? What conceptions of the teaching profession do these players convey?
2. How are conceptions of the “good teacher” manifested in the IETs’ recertification trajectory and particularly in the Updating program?
3. What kind of professional capital is embedded in conceptions of the “good teacher” in the recertification trajectory? What kind of assumptions underlie this capital?
4. How do these assumptions intersect with race, ethnicity, gender, language, and immigration processes? (Marom, 2016, pp. 3-4)

## Example 2

My doctoral research aims to explore how Chinese international students are produced politically through their engagement with democracy while pursuing degrees at universities in Canada and the United States. Specifically, this study examines the following three questions:

1. How do Chinese international students engage with democratic discourses and practices in Canada and the United States?
2. How does this engagement affect the students' thoughts on and/or actions towards democracy?
3. How do the students become and/or how are they made into political –and possibly democratic –subjects? (Li, 2020, p. 5)

What goes  
where?

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the literature review is backward  
looking (what has become before  
your study)



the theoretical framework is  
forward looking (since your study  
is adding something new)

# Literature reviews

Examples of organization for the literature review:

- chronologically: how has research in the field changed over time?
- geographically: how is research in the field different depending on its geographic location?
- methodologically: what different methodological approaches can be discerned in the research in the field?
- theoretically: what different theories have informed research in the field?

↑  
this discussion in the literature review is distinct from the theoretical framework, in which you explain what theoretical perspectives inform *your study*

## References

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