Saima wanted to explore gender and play in Early Years settings but when she started to read the existing literature in the area, she found that there were already many studies that identified the age at which children started to play more exclusively with their own gender and which identified differences in the types of play and play materials often used by boys and girls.

Saima felt at this stage that she may have nothing more to add to this discussion. However, she continued to read around the area and eventually read an article about the influence of peers on gendered play. She became interested in the idea that gendered play was linked to children’s need to conform and ‘fit in’ with peers. She began to think about whether gendered play in group settings was determined by this need to conform. She was curious to know whether this desire to ‘fit in’ was affected by the context in which the play was taking place. Saima’s final dissertation explored whether children in a Year 1 class (age 5–6) in a local primary school played differently in school and out of school, in terms of playmates, materials and types of play.
Case Study – Identifying Critical Debates Relevant to Your Study

Having read extensively Andy was interested in the development of government social policy which supported or exhorted mothers to join or rejoin the labour force. These policies were characterized by allowances, financial incentives and other initiatives to encourage unemployed women with children, particularly single parents to seek work and/or training. Andy wanted to explore the debate about these policy decisions. For some commentators these incentives and initiatives were regarded as a positive development for mothers and their children that would improve their economic well-being, standard of living and aspirations. For others the same developments constituted unwelcome and ill-judged pressure on mothers to return to work against their wishes or before they were ready and which risked condemning young children to long periods in childcare environments of variable and sometimes dubious quality.
Case Study – Choosing Keywords

Jane’s dissertation focused on how best to support ethnic minority pupils in Key Stage 2 (age 7–11) through the appropriate choice of learning and teaching approaches. For her initial review, she showed her supervisor two studies she had looked at. One explored communication difficulties that young children experienced in nurseries with particular reference to ethnic minority children. The other focused on an evaluation of the performance of the UK government’s Sure Start scheme in relation to ethnic minority communities. Jane’s supervisor pointed out that although either study might provide useful general background information neither matched Jane’s specific focus, that is ethnic minority pupils, Key Stage 2 and learning and teaching approaches. Jane explained that she had found a mass of material through a keyword search and had been overwhelmed with choices. Her supervisor suggested she picked more specific keywords to narrow her search more and try again.
Case Study – Department of Education website

The Department of Education website has many materials on it relevant to children’s services and schools, including evaluation reports and other publications, policy and legislation, announcements, consultations and statistics. If you were writing a literature review in this field you would, therefore, want to look at this site as a starting point to make sure you have the latest information. However, you would also want to consider the perspective much of this material comes from and how independent it may be. You would want to see how relevant policies and practice had been evaluated as well as searching independent sources such as refereed journals to see what others have said.
Case Study – Using a ‘Literature Map’

Rowena was studying the gender differences in play both at school and at home in a group of 6–7-year-olds. She included in her literature map the following themes:

- Theories and studies on gender identity development (ages and stages)
- Studies on gender differences in types of children's play
- Studies on choices of play materials/toys made by boys and girls
- Studies which explore differences in children's play at home and school
- Studies which explore influences on children's play choices such as adult expectations, media, peer pressure
- Theories and studies that link types of play to different ages/stages of development
- Studies on gender differences in types of children's play
Case Study – Using a Thematic Approach

Kai was studying the extent to which parents were encouraged to get involved in their children’s learning by staff in a Year 3 class in a primary school. His literature review focused on discussing key themes arising from this area which were drawn from a range of sources. The themes included:

- research into parental involvement and ‘models’ of partnership;
- the development of UK government policy on parent partnership;
- strategies used by schools and parents to support children’s learning at home;
- communication issues between teachers and parents;
- potential barriers to parental involvement in school.

Each of the themes was discussed using material from a range of sources including research papers in refereed journals, government policy documents; press reports; books; professional magazines and websites of schools and parents groups.
Case Study – Theory Testing

Sara is studying the extent to which babies in a private day nursery are showing attachment behaviours to their carers in the nursery. Sara wants to test the theory that securely attached children are better able to make attachments to other carers beyond their primary attachment to a parent or main carer. She wants to explore what stages babies go through on separation from their main carer and how they make attachments to other carers as part of this separation process. Sara is exploring a range of theories about children’s attachment behaviour starting from John Bowlby’s original work on attachment and the development of his theories from the 1950s onwards.
Case Study – Focusing on Methodology and Methods

Geraint's dissertation focused on adoption and in particular the incidence of adoption breakdown. He wanted to look at the approaches to seeking this information and the criteria used in different studies for determining whether an adoption had broken down or not. He was aware that in the UK some studies were based on government figures for children returned into the care system which might not have included all the children whose adoption had failed. He was also aware that some studies depended on parental reporting which involved varied criteria for what was defined as a ‘breakdown’. For example, where a 16-year-old was living away from home, albeit with adoptive parental support and involvement, that might be regarded in some quarters as a failed adoption. Geraint intended to critique the available studies in terms of their methodological approaches and the extent to which these produced reliable and valid results.
# Chapter 4: Ideas to Use

### Ideas to Use – ‘Radical’ or Critical Reading

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Ideas to Use – Reading Critically: Being a Critical Friend

The purpose of the exercise is for you to help one another to

● get to know the content (what the source actually says);
● comprehend the methodology/method(s) of the author(s);
● evaluate how trustworthy any claims are;
● consider how worthwhile the source is.

Individually

1. Getting the ‘gist’
   Read/scan the paper fairly quickly.
   Working in pairs/small groups discuss:

2. What’s the paper about?
   How would you summarize the paper?
   What is the research question(s)?
   Note down/discuss any key terms and concepts.

3. Data and analysis
   How did the author gather any data and analyse it?
   Why did he/she do it this way?
   What were the advantages/disadvantages?
   What claims does he/she make?

4. Your assessment/evaluation/appreciation
   What do you think of any claims made?
   How far is the source successful in its own terms, that is in relation to the author’s own research question(s)?
   What implications, if any, does the paper have in general and for your dissertation in particular?
   What issues or questions remain unresolved or unasked?
   What effect, if any, has the paper had on your own thinking about the issues or anything else?
Ideas to Use – Alternative Approaches to Note-taking

Jot things down sequentially as you go through the document from start to finish. Make some evaluative comments at the end.

Take notes sequentially but use two columns. In the first column note down factual information about the source. In the second column make some commentary/remarks on the content as you go along.

Try breaking a document down by summarizing each page in three sentences and then summarizing all your sentences in one paragraph.

Read the document noting down only a few headings that represent the key themes and issues raised. Then return to the text and make more detailed notes under each of your headings.

Try a question and answer with a critical friend following the sample summary outline verbally, then write it down.
Ideas to Use – Developing a Literature Map

Using the model provided above:

(a) write a list of themes that have emerged from your reading so far;
(b) draw a literature map for your review to include these themes;
(c) start to group your readings under the themes on the map.
Chapter 4: Points to Think About

Point to Remember – Don’t Get Distracted by Things That Are Interesting but Not Relevant

Comparing school starting ages between European countries may be a useful way of showing that children in the UK start formal schooling at an earlier age compared to their peers in similar countries. However you would need to exercise great caution before deciding that such differences imply that one approach is ‘better’ than another. Such educational policy differences are the product of cultural and historical factors and simplistic policy borrowing in which it is argued that one country should copy the policies and practices of another in order to solve all its problems without any reference to its own history and traditions is naive.
Points to Remember – Structuring Your Literature Review

The majority of literature reviews will follow a fairly standard pattern:

Introduction
Describing briefly what the review will cover and the scope of the literature included. This may also indicate how the review is organized or structured.

Main Body
This section is where the literature selected is discussed, analysed, compared and critiqued according to your chosen structure.

Conclusions
In this section the main themes emerging and their significance for your study are summarized and discussed leading the way into your own research.
Points to Remember – Finding the Right Literature

It is important not to just give up trying and decide to change your topic if you are struggling to find the literature you need. You may need to do that eventually but if your supervisor has agreed your topic it is probable that the literature is available and you just have not found it. It is also important to ask for help if you are struggling to get the ‘right’ keywords. Sometimes at this stage you need to persevere by trying different keywords and combinations. It is also important not to use what you can find even if it is a poor fit with your topic. This will damage your dissertation from the start. Remember also that if you find any relevant articles or texts then use items from the reference lists from these to extend your reading.
Points to Think About – Assessing Your Sources

Ensure that you make a thorough assessment of your sources:

● What are the findings, claims or arguments contained in this source and how do they inform your study?
● Does this work inform the background to your study or does it relate directly to the research question(s) you are asking?
● What theoretical basis/methodological approach underpins this work (if any) and how does this relate to the theory/methodology that you are using (if any)?
● Where does this work fit into the literature map that you are developing? Does it fit a theme that you have already identified or does it indicate a new theme that you could consider?
● Is the context of the work relevant to the study that you are doing, for example a similar type of sample?
Chapter 4: Recommended Reading and Further Sources of Information

Your university should have online advice about writing a literature review and there may be course-level advice as well.

Chapter 4: Reflective Tasks

Choose a study on a previous piece of research that is relevant to your research topic and read it:

1. What was the methodological approach and how well did it work to gather the required data? Could it have been done differently and if so how?

2. What was the sample size? How could this affect the influence of the study on your own work?

3. How old is the study? Why is this important and how do you need to reflect this in your literature review? Was anything different about the context when this study was done?

4. How was the data analysed? Does the analytical approach work well to produce answers to the research questions? Could it have been done differently?

5. Do the conclusions and/or recommendations accurately reflect the findings? Can you see how the author(s) reached their conclusions? How do they contribute to knowledge in the field?

6. How does this study fit with other studies in the field? Are there similarities? Are their differences in findings and if so what may be the reasons?

7. What was the methodological approach and how well did it work to gather the required data? Could it have been done differently and if so how?

8. What was the sample size? How could this affect the influence of the study on your own work?

9. How old is the study? Why is this important and how do you need to reflect this in your literature review? Was anything different about the context when this study was done?

10. How was the data analysed? Does the analytical approach work well to produce answers to the research questions? Could it have been done differently?

11. Do the conclusions and/or recommendations accurately reflect the findings? Can you see how the author(s) reached her/his conclusions? How do they contribute to knowledge in the field?

12. How does this study fit with other studies in the field? Are there similarities? Are there differences in findings and if so what may be the reasons?
Chapter 4: Summary of Key Points

- Start reading early on and keep your reference list up-to-date right from the start.
- Check to see if you already have relevant material from elsewhere on your course or from other sources. Use the reference lists or bibliographies from these materials to find other items.
- Make sure you discuss your plans with your supervisor(s) and seek other expert support as required, for example library advisers.
- Choose your keywords carefully to ensure you find the main studies in your chosen area. Be prepared to revise your search terms if you are not successful first time round in your searches.
- Start a literature map as soon as themes begin to emerge and extend it as you continue to search and read.
- Group your chosen items under the themes in your map as you find them and extend your themes as new ones emerge. Note any gaps in your map and fine-tune your literature searches to fill them.
- Ensure all items used are relevant, academically respectable or in some other way appropriate for your study.
- Be prepared to abandon irrelevant and/or out-of-date material.
- Make sure your review makes links and connections between themes, theories and issues.
- Make sure your review contains critical discussion of the sources chosen and the themes, theories and issues identified.