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Planning and writing your dissertation literature review: a guide for final year degree veterinary nursing students (part two)

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims to help undergraduate student veterinary nurses undertaking their dissertation to write their literature review. Utilising the supervisor, addressing the six key items, and using a story board approach to plan a logical structure are recommended. Demonstrating depth and breadth of relevant knowledge, and finding an academic voice as part of the critical evaluation of material in a context relevant way is considered essential, in order to authoritatively guide the reader to the subsequent original study the author will research. This helps to ensure that the literature review has achieved its aims and is considerably favourably.

KEYWORDS: dissertation; literature review; student veterinary nurse; undergraduate

Introduction

Veterinary nursing students obtaining their initial qualification via the honour's degree route will be required to complete a dissertation project as part of their final year studies. This is a high stakes summative assessment worth a large proportion of the marks awarded in the final year and can have a significant effect on the student's final degree classification. Therefore, the student veterinary nurse should methodically plan their approach to the dissertation to maximise their chances of academic success.

The aim of this paper (part two of a two-part series) is to assist veterinary nurses to write a literature review that will achieve a high mark. In part one the focus was on planning the literature review. In this part the focus will be on writing the literature and some of the considerations to think about when doing so. We will continue with the example of dog welfare within the veterinary practice to illustrate the points made. Please note:

some citations within this paper are fictitious and used to illustrate points only.

Writing the abstract

Normally a literature review will have an abstract, but it is variable between institutions as to whether they require their students to provide separate abstracts for the literature review and the original research project, or one standalone abstract that covers both the original study and the literature review. Therefore, only generic advice is provided here:

- It goes at the start but you should write the abstract after you have finished writing the work that the abstract will cover. Your abstract is a summary of this work, and so should be driven by the content of this.
- Write your abstract in past or present tense (check your university's recommendation – it is controversial!), not future tense. Your abstract is a summary of work already written.

- Summarise the key points from your work in sequential order. E.g. a logical order for a literature review abstract might be:
 - 1st item: summarise the introduction
 - 2nd item: summarise the aims of the literature review
 - 3rd – 5th item: summarise the key points from sub-theme 1, 2 and 3.
 - 6th item: concluding line with key further recommendations.
- Do not send your supervisor the abstract to provide formative feedback on without providing them with the paper that it is a summary of. They cannot provide feedback on whether it is an accurate attempt to summarise content without knowing what it should be a summary of.

Writing the introduction

The aim of the introduction is to set the scene: you want to provide the background to the literature, introduce the subject matter (but leave any discussion until the main part), justify the importance of the topic (to the appropriate audience – think veterinary professionals, not the marker), and then provide the aim(s) of the literature review.

As an experienced supervisor of student dissertation projects, I now insist that my students provide the aim of their literature review *before* I give my feedback on their first draft because otherwise I cannot give them meaningful feedback on how well their literature review addresses its aims. And, if the literature review doesn't have any aims, how can it be anything other than a brain dump for everything a student knows (or finds out) for a given theme?

Speak to your supervisor at the start about your aims – they will be able to help guide you to identify appropriate aims for your study. While it is your dissertation, research is a collaborative effort and your supervisor can be a co-author of your work (see [Figure 1](#)) if you publish it so let them work for the right to be a name on your research paper! However, you remain ultimately responsible so ensure you have a clear vision for what you want this literature review to achieve before putting pen to paper, and keep checking throughout that you are focused on addressing these aims.

If you are someone who struggles with structuring content, think about the

introduction as telling a story with the end being your aim. For example, the opening line (in your head only!) might be:

“This is the 400-word evidence-based story of why a literature review that focuses on the role of low stress handling methods and approaches used with dogs at veterinary clinics is important for the veterinary professional to read”.

You want your reader to read your introduction and believe that this is a really important area to know more about (the content of your literature review) and that it is almost a miscarriage of justice that no one has already written a review paper that addresses this topic. If you can achieve this while still keeping an academic style of writing (understated, formal and written in ‘third person’ voice) you already have the marker firmly on your side.

Plot out how the introduction will tell this story in a way that is evidence-based and convincing, remembering the role each paragraph will play. You will only have around 3 paragraphs to tell your story and report the aim, so think about what each paragraph specifically contributes as a message. Then assemble the evidence to support the key points that you want to make. In my experience, this is something that students find problematic, and can become more focused on reporting the evidence that the key message gets lost behind minute detail. See [Figure 2](#) for a worked example.

➤ **Hint!** Obtain a few published literature reviews in peer reviewed journals (any topic, you are interested in structure not content) and look at how the authors write their introduction. The general style and approach taken is what you want to emulate.

Writing the main body

Once you have a powerful introduction you have ticked off one of the six things (and started to achieve items 2,3,4,5 and 6 – see [Table 1](#) for a reminder) that you need to achieve in this literature review and are ready to start preparing to write the main body.

➤ **Hint!** In your literature review never call the main body of the literature review the “main body”. Instead, provide sub-headings that are ‘subject – relevant’.

In the main body you now need to show the reader (marker) that you can achieve

2–6 to a high standard and we will now focus on these.

Paving the way

You have already selected an area for your literature review to cover that is broader than your proposed study but within which your original research study will sit within. However, you now need to think about *how* you will use this material you have identified as relevant to clearly *demonstrate* the relevance in a way that will have them both understanding this broader area but also arrive logically at the point at which your original study will take over within your thesis. You need to have addressed two key aspects:

1. The order in which you present material i.e. the sub-themes suggested in part one must permit a logical and coherent progression through your literature review.
2. A research gap must be clearly identified that you will then address with your study.

There may be more than one order that would make sense. If you are struggling to achieve this, try using the same storyboard approach outlined earlier. For example, imagine we want to use the following three sub-themes to address the aim ([Figure 2](#)) of our review:

- Approaches to minimising stress on canines at the vet practice (A)
- Defining stress and approaches to measuring it in canines (B)
- The impact of stress on canine welfare and behaviour at the vet practice (C)

It is not logical to start with how to minimise stress before letting the reader know what stress is and how it affects canine welfare in dogs visiting the veterinary practice. A storyboard (can help you identify a more logical pathway by simplifying the underlying story. The story board ([Figure 3](#)) suggests the order B, C, A would be logical.

The important emotional and intellectual journey and the relevance to the veterinary nurse

Keep the emotional/intellectual journey and the relevance to the veterinary nurse firmly in mind as you start writing each sub-section as the literature review should contribute something original or of interest

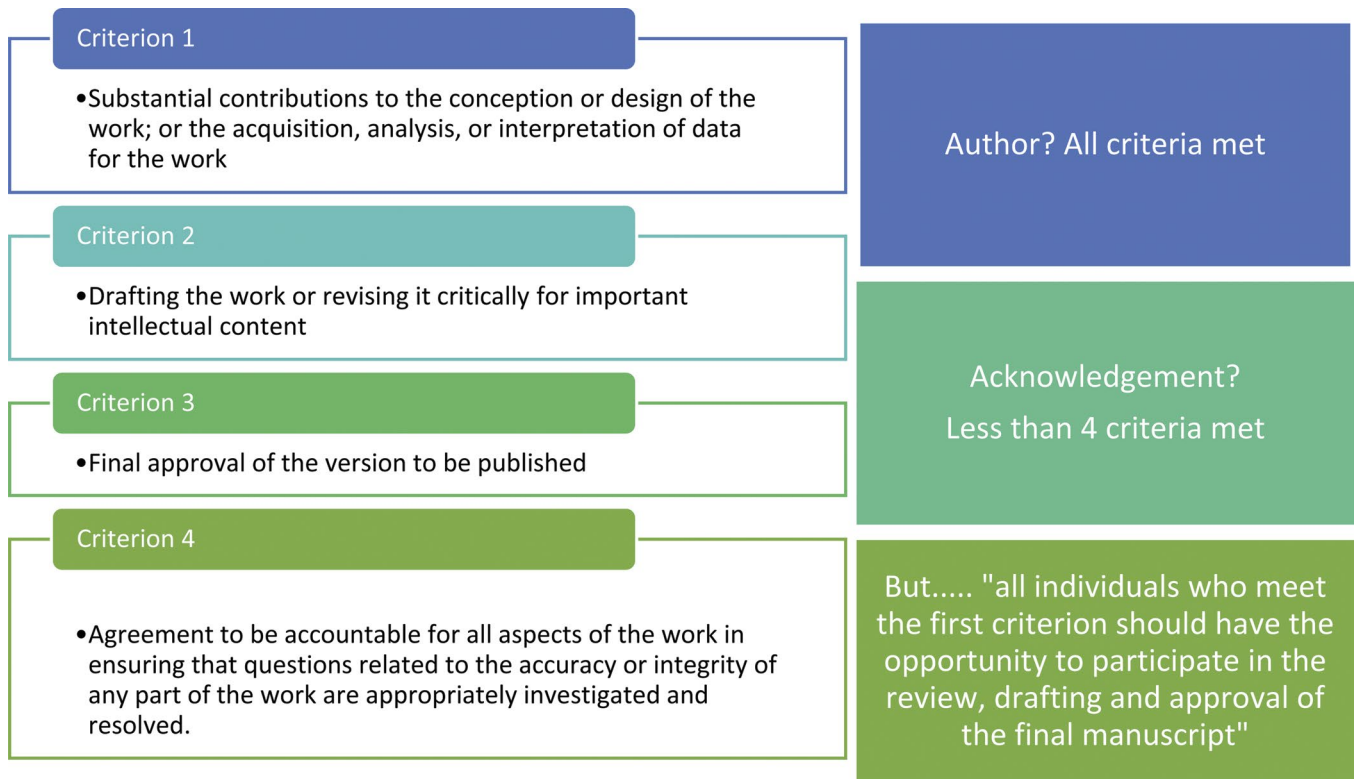


Figure 1. The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (2020) guidance on who should be an author of a published paper (including literature reviews). This often confuses student veterinary nurses who can feel possessive of what has been their labour of love. However, research (including literature reviews) rarely is conducted in a one person bubble. A supportive supervisor will often have very significant input into the aims, suggested themes, content, will have given extensive feedback on earlier drafts, etc. An ethical researcher has research integrity.

to the veterinary profession. Link back regularly to show how the material you present relates back to an aspect of veterinary nursing. Don't leave it to the reader to work out the relevance to them as veterinary nursing practitioners. Similarly, identify research gaps that need investigating and justify why veterinary nurses will consider those gaps important to address.

Remember you are not just ensuring that the literature review per se is of interest to veterinary nurses, you are also building the case for why **the research gap you want to address** is of interest to the reader. Think about: how will you build the case for why the research gap that you will address (your original research study): is the importance to the veterinary nurse/practice of veterinary nursing clear? Do not miss opportunities to link back into the specific area you will focus on in the original study. For example, if you are going to research high value food on puppy stress levels during vaccination, you might find ways to link your discussion back to veterinary nursing clinics, 2nd vaccinations, the animal welfare or evidence-based practice aspect of the code of conduct, and so on. By the time they reach the conclusion the veterinary nurse reader should be left *knowing* (the intellectual journey) that the research gap you are going to address is an important

one and *wanting* (the emotional journey) it to be filled. Remember that you still need to do this with an academic style of writing.

Depth & breath of knowledge and understanding

Demonstrating depth and breadth of knowledge of the literature relevant to the themes covered in your literature review is critical to achieving a good mark (high 50s/60s) in the literature review. You will not achieve a mark higher than around the 50s (or lower, depending on how deficient in this area your knowledge base is) if you do not adequately demonstrate this.

The material that is appropriate to report in your literature review will depend on why the material is being reported, though most of your references should be from peer reviewed journals. Throughout your early studies I am sure many of you will have been told not to use popular press resources such as newspaper articles or 'old' research papers. Use that advice critically. There will be times where it is appropriate to use popular press material. For example, if you are reviewing the media's role in the portrayal of 'dangerous dogs', it would be reasonable to cite articles in popular UK newspapers as

evidence that the UK media portray certain breeds as 'devil dogs'.

Likewise, there will be times when it is not only appropriate, but a serious omission not to include, an 'old' reference. Ask yourself is: "it might be old, but is it relevant?" For example, in my PhD, I cited a paper that was 103 years old. However, it was the seminal paper for the concept discussed. Therefore, it would be a serious omission not to include it. You can signpost why you have included the paper by the way you report it (e.g. "The seminal work by Yerkes and Dodson (1908)...").

Despite such exceptions, it remains true to say that most of your references should from credible scientific sources i.e. primarily peer reviewed journals, and while the basics will not be covered here as something addressed early in your academic studies, the following issues or queries are highlighted as still commonly encountered:

1. **Avoid only using the abstract** – it seems common for students to often use the abstract only of a paper. Sometimes this is because of university library access issues. Speak to the librarian to see if they can order it from the British Library or find it

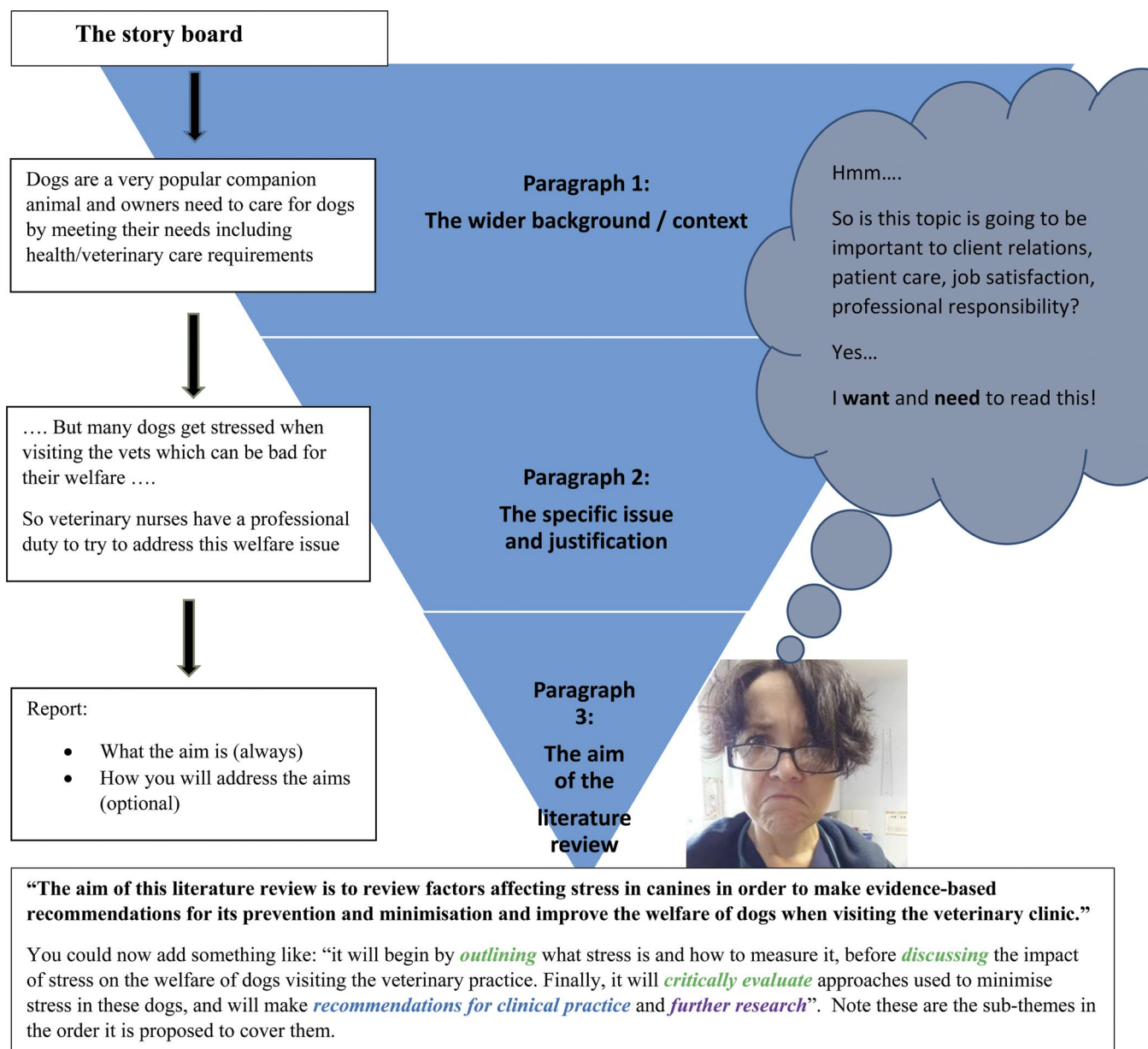


Figure 2. Telling the story with an inverted triangle and a story board. Your introduction will need to be padded out with more depth and evidence to support the claims that you make, but the evidence should be used to support the story, and not overshadow the story. This is just one example and not the only story that could be used to introduce this literature review. Try reading a few published literature reviews (and research studies – the principle is the same!) and see if you can see the outline story they are telling. Nb. note how the use of the language in green is showing the reader the approach you will take to using this material within your review (think level 6 descriptors, see part one, figure one, and Quality Assurance Agency, 2014, and how you will ensure the markers are in no doubt that you have met these), the phrase in blue is linking back to veterinary nurses (what is in it for them as a target readership?), and the language in purple is paving the way for your original research study.

for you using their more experienced literature finding skills. If only the abstract is available this is a severe limitation preventing you from evaluating research quality so be clear about this. Always try to obtain the full paper and read this as your mastery of the underlying evidence base will be strengthened. For example, you will be able to identify methodological differences that might explain differential results or you might find the abstract claims do not reflect the full paper’s findings. For example, read the Beata *et al.* (2007)

paper comparing alpha-casozepine (Zylkene) with selegiline hydrochloride (Seligan) (the issues are discussed in a Veterinary Evidence Knowledge Summary, see: Buckley, 2017a) and draw your own conclusions. You will also be able to cite a paper’s findings with greater precision and detail, as well as identify valuable sources of additional research and key issues in their field from their introduction and discussion and reference list.

2. **How much literature should be included?** There is no exact answer as

100 references could be included but if they were all poor quality and irrelevant then this would be inadequate. As a very rough and ready guide, work on around 40 – 50 good quality references for a 3000 – 5000 word literature review (the more the better). Remember this is a review of the literature, so the volume of literature reviewed should reflect that, otherwise it is just a poorly supported opinion piece.

3. **Citation use** – several common issues are covered. Firstly, use lots of citations to demonstrate your mastery of the

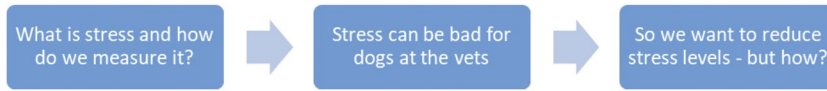


Figure 3. Story board to help organise sub-themes.

knowledge base by using them to link to more specific findings, and use multiple citations to support one finding where appropriate. For example, for particularly important points or to demonstrate that that has been lots of research in X area. Secondly, review how you use your citations to improve citation use sophistication and avoid academic poor practice or plagiarism issues. Finally, revisit how you use and cite material from secondary sources. There are different ways to handle this:

- The inferior way: use your citations to clearly signal that they were citing another source at this point. For example: “the use of Dreamies™ during veterinary nursing consultations was anecdotally associated with reduced evidence of stress in cats (Catwoman±, 2019, cited by Brockley, 2020)”.
- The better way: retrieve the original paper referred to, and then cite this paper. In our example ‘Catwoman, 2019’. You might find that the other paper misinterpreted or overstated what Catwoman claimed e.g. maybe Catwoman claimed this only for Persian cats, or perhaps only her own experiences of attending nurse clinics for a nail trim. You may have additional thoughts having read this e.g. if Catwoman claimed it for her own personal experiences as a ‘female cat’ only, would it be unwise to extrapolate to other breeds of cat?. With the inferior route this would be missed, and this will show in the depth of knowledge demonstrated but also your opportunities to critically evaluate the material (next section).

See Table 2 for a worked example of how to improve your style to address these issues.

±Made up example. I am not aware that Catwoman has developed a career in science, but this is not an evidence-based claim and if you find out different, please write a paper to refute this claim.

Critical evaluation

This really is the ‘biggy’ that can send an otherwise competently conducted literature review into the first-class honours stratosphere. If you have ticked all the other five

things (see Table 1), it is critical evaluation that will lift your marks through the 60s and into the 70s and beyond. Despite this, many students, even at postgraduate level are not entirely clear as to what critical evaluation really involves.

What is critical evaluation?

Critical evaluation can be defined in different ways, but it is basically asking the student to provide a balanced discussion that considers both the positive and negative aspects of the material reviewed, in order to make reasoned recommendations, inferences, conclusions, etc.

Ways can you critically evaluate:

There really are only three ways in which you will critically evaluate the work cited within your literature review, and most examples that you will see are variants on these:

1. **Internal validity** – here you are evaluating the quality of the literature source(s) itself. Is the quality or reliability of the literature source good enough to inform or influence your decision making? How you should

approach this evaluation will depend upon what type of literature source it is and the reason that you plan to use this material within your literature. E.g. how you evaluate a popular press article may differ to a peer reviewed research study.

2. **External validity** – here you are evaluating how well you can apply the findings/claims to the situation e.g. UK veterinary practices. Or, in essence, is it relevant and what are the limits to this relevance?
3. **Research/information gaps** – here you are identifying areas in which there is not enough information or understanding about an area, or the collective body of evidence is limited by its internal validity/quality and how important it is to remedy this deficit.

For both external and internal validity it is possible to consider this at the level of each individual source (i.e. how good is an individual paper and how well does it apply to your context?) or the overall body of literature addressing a given issue i.e. how good is the collective body of evidence and how well does this collective body of evidence apply to your context?. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve deeper into the specifics of 1, 2, and 3 but they have been covered in an earlier paper in the Veterinary Nursing Journal (Buckley, 2017b), and for a more detailed review of how to critique research papers see Dean (2013) and Greenhalgh (2019).

Many of the students that do appreciate the need for critical evaluation go one of three ways when critically evaluating material. Either they:

1. Do all critical evaluations behind the scenes and then just present the work they have already decided is the best evidence to use. The issue with this is that it is then difficult for the marker to fully appreciate their critical evaluation skills. They don’t know if you excluded material by accident (you cited only the material you found only) or lack the ability to see alternative points of view, or by design (undertook your balanced discussion behind the scenes and just presented the conclusion). If this student is you,

Table 1. A reminder of the six things that an undergraduate Honour’s degree dissertation needs to achieve.

The same principles apply for postgraduate literature reviews (just increase the depth/breadth of knowledge and critical analysis undertaken) or literature reviews written for other scientific disciplines (substitute item 6 for an alternative discipline e.g. clinical animal behaviour, veterinary physiotherapy).

Checklist: does your literature review....	
1. Have clear and achievable aims?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
2. Pave the way for your original research study?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
3. Demonstrate breadth/depth of knowledge and understanding?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
4. Demonstrate critical evaluation skills?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
5. Provide an emotional/intellectual journey that leads to your study?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
6. Show clear relevance to veterinary nursing?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Table 2. Using citations to support your claims: good and bad examples of how to do this. Nb. All citations in this example are fictitious.

Bad example	Problems
<p>"It is clear that dogs find visiting the veterinary practice stressful. Dogs have been reported to show behavioural and physiological signs of stress during a veterinary consultation. These signs of stress are reduced by using products such as Dog-appeasing pheromones, Pet Remedy, high value food rewards, prior attendance at puppy parties, but not by using citrus oil products (Jones, 2020)"</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Is Jones (2020) a primary source (carried out the research that found a given 'finding' out) or a secondary source (reporting what another author found out e.g. in a study?) 2. There are seven 'findings' here that are not clearly supported by a citation (bold in the quote). 3. What claims is the Jones (2020) citation supporting? Citrus oil? Citrus oil and puppy parties? C, PP, and HVFR, etc? 4. What claims are unsupported by a citation? 5. What supported claims are the literature review author's opinion? 6. What claims are findings plagiarised from another source but not referenced? <p>Hint! If you don't cannot tell, how does the marker of this literature review know?</p>
Good example	
<p>"It is clear that dogs find visiting the veterinary practice stressful. Dogs have been reported to show behavioural (Francis, 2019; Rogers and Simms, 2018; Bens, 2012) and physiological (Francis, 2019; Cooper, 2017; Mills and Boon, 2016) signs of stress during a veterinary consultation. These signs of stress are reduced by using products such as Dog-appeasing pheromones (Livingstone, 2010), Pet Remedy (Davidstone, 2012), high value food rewards (Francis, 2019; Davidstone, 2012), prior attendance at puppy parties (Miller, 2012; Heaton, 2010), but not by using citrus oil products (Francis, 2019)" You could even add at the end: "For a comprehensive review of this area, see Jones (2020)"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Now you have eight citations to support the same text! – It is clear which finding is being attributed to which source. – Note how Jones (2020) has disappeared from the main quote as this source was a secondary review paper. – By accessing, reading and referencing the primary resources you have: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrated more sophisticated use of the scientific literature (extra marks) • Demonstrated a greater depth and breadth of knowledge and understanding (extra marks) • Avoided the risk of plagiarism or poor academic practice charges (prevention of reduction of marks/failure).

try showing your workings out more – let them see the evaluative thinking process by putting this on paper and by including material you can critically evaluate

OR

2. They focus on a detailed critical evaluation of lots of the individual papers that they have included. Here they are showing the workings out but the level of detail e.g. several sentences to critique each paper used has limited the amount of literature included. If this is you, you are already doing well but you could move this to a higher level by: i) considering how you might evaluate a collective body of evidence provided by a group of studies within a given area, and ii) ensuring that you have used a succinct writing style that does not give un-necessary detail

OR

3. They critically evaluate but no one can tell that they are doing so because of their style of writing. You are one of these people if you tend not to use works like: "therefore, however, despite this, furthermore, nonetheless, whereas, etc". These are words that connect points, ideas, etc and allow the reader to follow the arguments that you are making in your literature review. If this is you, you

will improve your grade by reading about their use and adopting them in your writing style. Your university will probably offer courses or guides on academic writing, but otherwise you could check out the quick guide by Hull University (2020). See Table 3 for how signposting words can be used effectively.

In all cases, remember that you are not critically evaluating just for the sake of it. Make your points in conjunction with thinking about how a limitation is important to context e.g. dogs in veterinary practices you are interested in. You are critically evaluating to address the aims of your literature review and make reasoned judgements about the current state of the evidence available to address these.

Finding your voice

It is an unfortunate situation that we often accidentally drum this out of undergraduates early in their studies in order to ensure that they learn to write in an academic style (third person, claims supported by credible evidence), but you can strengthen your literature review by re-finding it in an academic way.

Compare:

- "The use of food rewards in veterinary practice has been shown to reduce signs of stress (Jones, 2019), increase signs of positive welfare (Bennett,

2018) and is a low cost (Strangeway, 2015) approach that can be offered to most dogs entering the veterinary practice. Therefore, food rewards are now included in most published low stress handling guidelines (Corriveau and Fellberger, 2020)".

With:

- "The use of food rewards in veterinary practice has been shown to reduce signs of stress (Jones, 2019), increase signs of positive welfare (Bennett, 2018) and is a low cost (Strangeway, 2015) approach that can be offered to most dogs entering the veterinary practice. Food rewards are now included in most published low stress handling guidelines (Corriveau and Fellberger, 2020). Therefore, the veterinary nurse should consider ways to increase uptake of the food reward approach among staff members. This could include reviewing and updating practice protocols and procedures to formalise this approach to patient welfare as part of the practice ethos".

In the first, the voice of the literature review author is nowhere to be found – or, in other words, every opinion is someone else's. In the latter they are demonstrating to the reader (marker) an example of a more authoritative approach, in which they have synthesised the evidence to make a clear, logical, and reasoned inference that is relevant to the aims of their literature review

(and links back to veterinary nursing!). Try to find your voice more – just back your inferences with evidence, or make the point that the inference (e.g. “the practitioner should make their decisions based on expert opinion and clinical experience...”) is made because of the lack of evidence (“...because there is a lack of higher quality evidence to address this issue”).

Writing the conclusion

Finally, you need to write the conclusion. Do not introduce new material e.g. research findings into this section. Instead, focus on summarising the key messages from the sub-themes to form the conclusion and use them to make evidence-based recommendations. This is likely to be partly practically focused e.g. veterinary nurses should ensure that they are up to date with evidence-based approaches for stress reduction in canines. However, crucially, your recommendation should include the need for research to identify research gaps identified, in particular, the research gap that you will then go on to fill (as the reader will find out when they turn the page!).

Some universities combine the introduction of the original study with the conclusion of the literature review, and some don't. If your institution does require this, then you should then end your conclusion by stating the research aims of your original study. If yours doesn't, then your conclusion is now finished and you are ready to turn to the next phase of your dissertation.

Conclusion

Student veterinary nurses should aim to achieve depth and breadth of knowledge, and critically evaluate this to synthesise new information in an authoritative way in their literature review. Those who can do this in a way that is relevant to, and of interest to, the veterinary nursing profession and leave them valuing the importance of the literature review and the subsequent original study will have a literature review to be proud of. It is hoped that this paper will have played its part in helping the student veterinary nurse to achieve the best mark that they can within this important assessment and that your literature review will directly impact on your subsequent nursing decisions as a registered veterinary nurse. Good luck and good wishes, and consider submitting your subsequent literature review to the *Veterinary Nursing Journal* or other journal to share with the wider veterinary nursing population.

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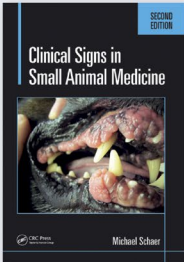
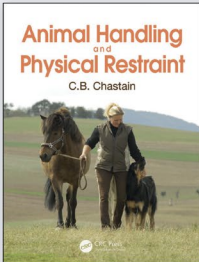
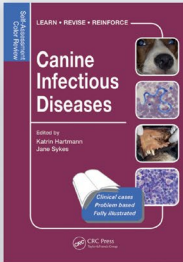
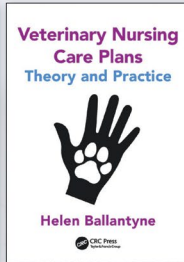
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