

Writing a Literature Review

WHAT IS A LITERATURE REVIEW?

The literature review is a critical look at the existing research that is significant to the work that you are carrying out. The overview identifies prominent research trends in addition to assessing the overall strengths and weaknesses of the existing research.

Purpose of the Literature Review

- To provide background information about a research topic.
- To establish the importance of a topic.
- To demonstrate familiarity with a topic/problem.
- To “carve out a space” for further work that allows you to effectively position yourself in a scholarly conversation.

Note: Different disciplines have different requirements of what constitutes an effective literature review. You should always consult your professor before beginning any writing assignment.

Planning

As you plan to write your literature review, you’ll need to begin by deciding what kind of literature review you are writing. Here are some things to consider: focus, type, scope, and disciplines associated with your review.

Focus: What is the specific thesis, problem, or research question that the literature review will help to define?

Type: What type of literature review is to be conducted? Will the review emphasize theory, methodology, policy, or qualitative/quantitative studies?

Scope: What is the scope of material and what kinds of sources will be used?

Disciplines: What academic discipline(s) will be included (e.g. nursing, psychology, sociology, etc.)

Reading & Research

Collecting and reading current research on your topic entails several steps:

Collect and Read: Collect literature relevant to your topic that fits within the focus, type, scope, and discipline you have chosen for your review. Use databases, bibliographies, and recommendations from advisors to identify adequate source material. Read the sources carefully enough to understand their main arguments and relevance to your study. Consider highlighting important material that might be germane to your review.

Summarize: Once you have read your source material, consider writing a brief summary of the text using the following questions as a guideline:

- 1) Who is the author? What is the author's standing in the field?
- 2) What seems to be the author's main purpose. To offer advice? To make practical suggestions? To critique? To solve a problem? To establish the truth?
- 3) What is the author's theoretical perspective?
- 4) Who is the intended audience?
- 5) What is the principal point, conclusion, thesis, contention, or question?
- 6) How is the author's position supported? Does the author consider alternative evidence or explanations?
- 7) How does this study fit into the context of the problem or topic? Does this study cite other studies you've seen cited elsewhere? Is it cited by other studies? If so, how?
- 8) What does this study add to your specific project?

Please note: These summaries will probably not be incorporated into your final literature review. Their purpose is to help you clarify your understanding of what each text is arguing and what approach(es) to the author(s) uses.

Select: Your next step is to sort through your summaries and select only those books and articles that are most relevant to your project. Resist the temptation to incorporate everything you have read—this will only make a difficult task impossible.

Analyzing

A literature review is never just a list of studies—it's always an implicit argument about a body of research or it is part of a larger argument. Thus, your literature review needs to contain a balance of summary and analysis. This analysis occurs on two levels: individual studies and the field as a whole. The following four tasks will help you analyze the existing research in your chosen field.

Summary: In your own words, summarize and/or synthesize key findings relevant to your study from each of the major studies. Consider questions such as: What do we know about the immediate areas of this research field? What are the key arguments, characteristics, concepts, and figures? What are the existing debates/theories? What kinds of methodologies are generally employed by researchers in this area?

Comparison and Critique: Comparison and critique allow you to see the strengths and weaknesses of your field of research. Remember that you may not recognize the strengths and weaknesses until you've read widely in your subject and begin to see which studies are stronger. As you compare studies, you will begin to be able to offer critique. You may consider asking the following questions: How do the different studies relate to one another? What is new, different, or controversial about the various studies? What views need to be further tested? What evidence is lacking, inconclusive, contradicting, or too limited? What research designs or methods seem unsatisfactory?

Putting it All Together: Once you have summarized, synthesized, and critiqued the relevant literature, you will want to consider the overall picture that emerges. After assessing the literature in your field, you should be able to answer the following questions: Why should we study this research/problem? What contributions will my study make to the existing literature. Once you are able to answer these questions, you are ready to begin drafting your literature review.