

Literature Reviews



A literature review is a summary of materials that have been published by accredited scholars and researchers on a certain topic. It provides background on a topic for those unfamiliar with the subject. It is meant to convey what knowledge and ideas have already been established as well as the strengths and weaknesses of those ideas. In writing a literature review, you must have a guiding concept (e.g., your research objective, the problem or issue you are discussing, or your argumentative thesis). It is not just a descriptive list of the material available or a set of summaries. Along with an account of existing materials, a literature review must provide new insights about the topic, perhaps suggesting new interpretations or clarifying conflicts within previously published materials.

Occasionally, you will be asked to write a literature review as a separate assignment, but more often it is part of the introduction to an essay, research report, or thesis.

Besides expanding your knowledge about the topic, writing a literature review lets you gain and demonstrate skills in two areas:

- **information seeking:** the ability to scan the existing material efficiently, using manual or computerized methods, to identify a set of useful articles and books
- **critical appraisal:** the ability to identify unbiased and valid studies by applying principles of analysis

Forming the Literature Review

- **A literature review must do these things:**
 - be organized around and related directly to the thesis or research question you are developing
 - synthesize results into a summary of what is and is not known
 - identify areas of controversy in the literature
 - formulate questions that need further research
 - suggest fresh insights into the topic
- **Ask yourself questions like these:**
 - What is the **specific thesis, problem, or research question** that my literature review helps to define?
 - What **type** of literature review am I conducting? Am I looking at issues of theory? Methodology? Policy? Quantitative research (e.g. on the effectiveness of a new procedure)? Qualitative research (e.g., studies)?
 - What is the **scope** of my literature review? What types of publications am I using (e.g., journals, books, government documents, popular media)? What discipline am I working in (e.g., nursing, psychology, sociology, medicine)?

- How good was my **information seeking**? Has my search been wide enough to ensure I've found all the relevant material? Has it been narrow enough to exclude irrelevant material? Is the number of sources I've used appropriate for the length of my paper?
- Have I **critically analyzed** the literature I use? Do I follow through a set of concepts and questions, comparing items to each other in the ways they deal with them? Instead of just listing and summarizing items, do I assess them, discussing strengths and weaknesses?
- Have I cited and discussed studies **contrary** to my perspective?
- Will the reader find my literature review **relevant, appropriate, and useful**?

IMPORTANT: A literature review is a piece of **discursive (broad) prose**, not a list describing or summarizing one piece of literature after another. It's usually a bad sign to see every paragraph beginning with the name of a researcher. Instead, organize the literature review into sections that present themes or identify trends, including relevant theory. You are not trying to list all the material published, but to synthesize and evaluate it **according to the guiding concept of your thesis or research question**.

- **When researching and analyzing existing material, consider the following questions:**
 - Has the author formulated a problem/issue?
 - Is it clearly defined? Is its significance (scope, severity, relevance) clearly established?
 - Could the problem have been approached more effectively from another perspective?
 - What is the author's research orientation (e.g., interpretive, critical science, combination)?
 - What is the author's theoretical framework (e.g., psychological, developmental, feminist)?
 - What is the relationship between the theoretical and research perspectives?
 - Has the author evaluated the literature relevant to the problem/issue? Does the author include researchers who take positions she or he does not agree with?
 - In a research study, how good are the basic components of the study design (e.g., population, intervention, outcome)? How accurate and valid are the measurements? Is the analysis of the data accurate and relevant to the research question? Are the conclusions validly based upon the data and analysis?
 - In material written for a popular readership, does the author use appeals to emotion, one-sided examples, or rhetorically charged language and tone? Is there an objective basis to the reasoning, or is the author merely "proving" what he or she already believes?
 - How does the author structure the argument? Is it possible to "deconstruct" the flow of the argument to see whether or where it breaks down logically (e.g., in establishing cause-effect relationships)?
 - In what ways does this book or article contribute to our understanding of the problem under study, and in what ways is it useful for practice? What are the strengths and limitations?
 - How does this book or article relate to the specific thesis or question I am developing?

Writing the Literature Review

- **Introduction**

- Define or identify the general topic, issue, or area of concern, thus providing an appropriate context for reviewing the literature.
- Point out overall trends in what has been published about the topic; or conflicts in theory, methodology, evidence, and conclusions; or gaps in research and scholarship; or a single problem or new perspective of immediate interest.
- Establish your reason (point of view) for reviewing the literature; explain the criteria to be used in analyzing and comparing literature and the organization of the review (sequence); and, when necessary, state why certain literature is or is not included (scope).

- **Body**

- Group research studies and other types of literature (reviews, theoretical articles, case studies, etc.) according to common denominators such as qualitative versus quantitative approaches, conclusions of authors, specific purpose or objective, chronology, etc.
- Summarize individual studies or articles with as much or as little detail as each merits according to its comparative importance in the literature, remembering that space (length) denotes significance.
- Provide the reader with strong "umbrella" sentences at beginnings of paragraphs, "signposts" throughout, and brief "so what" summary sentences at intermediate points in the review to aid in understanding comparisons and analyses.

- **Conclusion**

- Summarize major contributions of significant studies and articles to the body of knowledge under review, maintaining the focus established in the introduction.
- Evaluate the current "state of the art" for the body of knowledge reviewed, pointing out major methodological flaws or gaps in research, inconsistencies in theory and findings, and areas or issues pertinent to future study.
- Conclude by providing some insight into the relationship between the central topic of the literature review and a larger area of study such as a discipline, a scientific endeavor, or a profession.

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