

Literature Review

What is a literature review?

A literature review is a discussion of the published information in a particular subject area. While it can be a summary of sources on a certain subject, more often it takes a critical, evaluative approach, showing the relationships between the various writings and how they relate to your own work. Do not consider a literature review a simple summary of an unrelated group of articles. A good literature review will look at the research that has been done and synthesize or pull together those elements that are similar or most pertinent to the theme you have chosen.

Reading a literature review can often give you a solid overview of the research on a topic. Lit reviews are often critical sections of scholarly research papers, and are sometimes papers on their own. Literature reviews are most often written by researchers in the sciences and social sciences who report on lab or empirical research.

Steps to take before beginning to write

Clarify

Ask your professor to explain the assignment in terms of how the paper should be written. You should know if the paper should summarize, evaluate, synthesize or critique your sources. Ask how many sources you should include, and what types you should use (journal articles, books or Web sites). Ask if you should include background or historical information for your topic that might not be found in the sources.

Find models

Look for other literature reviews in your subject area to get a sense of how they are written. You can find lit reviews included in most research or scholarly articles. You can add "review" to your other search terms while searching the Web or journal databases.

Narrow your topic

The more narrow your topic, the better your chances of finding specific pieces of research to fit your own topic. Look for the seminal work in your field, since these will often form the basis of the research of others. Remember to ask your professor for his or her expertise on the subject!

Researching for a literature review

Consider how current your sources must be

Generally, you will use sources that are as current as possible. When researching subjects that are constantly changing, such as technology, science or medicine, having the most recent, cutting edge information is critical. In other areas, such as the history or the humanities, it may be most important to show how the particular perspectives on the topic have changed or are affected by other factors.

Find a focus

Look for themes or issues that tie together your sources. Do the authors share perspectives or are they varied? Are research results consistent or divergent? Are there raging debates? Does the research reveal certain trends or directions? Are there certain aspects or populations left out of the research? Selecting one of these themes will give a focus and sense of organization to your lit review.

Write a thesis statement

After you have settled on a focus for your lit review, write a thesis statement that will provide the perspective that your paper will take. For example:

Over the years, dieting trends have come and gone out of fashion. The latest seems to be a back-to-basics approach that combines a balanced diet with regular exercise.

Gather your sources

If you intend to use journal articles, select the journal index(es) that pertain to your subject area (in the case above, health or nutrition). List the keywords that best describe your topic; generally, use nouns (such as *diets* and *trends*) rather than verbs (such as *effect* or *behave*). Begin by searching broadly, adding keywords to narrow your topic. Ask a Reference Librarian to suggest search terms and for help selecting and navigating databases. When you find good sources, consider “harvesting” additional sources by examining the reference lists of pertinent articles.

Scan the materials you have collected (in other words, skim the abstracts, beginning and conclusions) to decide which you think might be most relevant. Make a pile of the best, most important works, and put the others aside (do not toss them out for now – you never know what you may return to in the future). Once you have decided which are the best and most important sources, read them more carefully and take notes. Keep all of your printouts until *after* your paper is returned, just in case you need to refer to them

Organization of a lit review

Similar to other papers you have written, your literature review should also contain three basic parts:

- An introduction, giving the reader a quick idea of your topic and the central theme or organizational pattern you will follow.
- The body, which contains your discussion of sources.
- A conclusion and recommendations, in which you posit what you have learned from your lit review, what questions it raised for you, how you plan to proceed, or what seems to be missing from the research.

Since most of your energy will go into writing the body of the paper, below are several organizational frameworks. Your topic may lend itself better to one or the other, and your professor may have further ideas.

Chronological: if the research in your sources appears to follow a chronological progression, whether in thought or practice, this could be a logical framework for organizing your lit review.

Trends: you may be able to identify trends within the research or treatment of your topic. This may be similarly chronological, but certain trends may encompass greater historical eras and be geographical, cultural, etc.

Thematic: thematic reviews focus on central issues or topics. While time may still be a consideration, the main focus is not the passage of time but the topic itself. As you write the review, you will use your sources to reinforce the theme that you have chosen as central to your paper.

Methodological: instead of the content, this framework is organized around the methodologies used in the research. You may be presenting an analysis of research techniques according to criteria as to whether they are valid and reliable, are applicable across cultural and economic ranges, address substantive issues within the field, and the techniques used, such as qualitative, quantitative, in-depth case studies, longitudinal, and so on. This approach to lit review is often used by researchers who wish to justify their choice of one methodology over others.

Current state: your intention is to present only the present status of the topic.

Other criteria or standards: you may wish to place your own limitations, for example, only journals published outside the U.S, or only peer-reviewed journals.

Writing recommendations

Your writing should demonstrate your skills and abilities in two critical areas:

- **Information seeking:** using research skills to identify a set of interrelated literature.
- **Critical appraisal:** applying principles of analysis in order to identify unbiased and valid studies and mining the themes relevant to your topic.

The following suggestions will help guide your writing:

Read and write with purpose

Write your thesis statement on a post-it and tape it in front of you so that you can always focus on your goal. As you read your sources, look for the major concepts, theories, arguments, conclusions, etc. contained in the work, and how they are related or similar to each other. As you write your paper, your purpose will be to evaluate and show the relationships between the research.

Use evidence, but be selective

You must provide the reader with evidence to back up and justify what you write. However, when you have a strong focus and a clear organizational framework (as discussed above), include only the information that points back to your thesis. Use care when paraphrasing to be sure you accurately represent the authors' thoughts and findings. Use quotes sparingly, if at all – make your own voice clear and center.

Summarize, synthesize and transition

Assume your readers have not read the sources you are reviewing. You will need to present/summarize for them, and synthesize your findings. Construct paragraphs that can stand by themselves (with an introductory sentence and a conclusion) and provide transitions from one thought or source to another.

Drafts and revisions

Your first draft may consist of a rough outline and series of notes. As you write your text from your outline, refer often to your thesis statement. Use terminology that is appropriate to your field and audience, avoiding slang, jargon and contractions. Add subheadings when appropriate to break up longer sections.

Check that you have documented your sources correctly, both in the text of your paper and on your reference list. Remember to include everything cited in your paper on your reference list, and include everything on your reference list in your paper – in other words, the two must match.

Edit and revise your paper as needed. A good idea is to ask someone else look it over for technical or organizational errors – it is very easy to miss your own mistakes. The writing tutors in the O'Neill Center can be terrifically helpful at this point.

Resources

Web sites

How to write a literature review (University of California, Santa Cruz)
<http://library.ucsc.edu/ref/howto/literaturereview.html>

Literature reviews (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill)
http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/literature_review.html

Literature review: A few tips on conducting it (University of Toronto)
<http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/litrev.html>

Writing guides in print found in CLICnet

Aveyard, H. (2007). *Doing a literature review in health and social care: A practical guide*. Maidenhead; NY: Open University Press.

Cooper, H. (1998). *Synthesizing research: A guide for literature reviews*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Craswell, G. (2005). *Writing for academic success: A postgraduate guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Garrard, J. (2007). *Health sciences literature review made easy: The matrix method*. Sudbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett.

Hart, C. (1998). *Doing a literature review: Releasing the social science research imagination*. London: Sage.

Lunenburg, F. C., & Irby, B. J. (2008). *Writing a successful thesis or dissertation: Tips and strategies in the social and behavioral sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.