

Literature Reviews

More than just listing papers, a lit review evaluates the research of others.

Why review the literature?

A literature review may be written for many reasons, including one or more of the following:

- To provide an overview that shows you are familiar with the field
- To identify issues, areas of contention or different perspectives
- To establish what issues still need to be explored (identifying gaps)
- To justify your own research
- To show how you selected a method, a theoretical framework or a way of analysing data
- To explain how your work builds on the work of others
- To show that your research is (or will be) an original contribution to the field.

Different types of review

Stand alone: For a stand-alone review, provide a fairly detailed introduction to explain its focus, context and purpose. Often this type of review is set as an assignment task, in order to answer a specific question. If this is not the case, focus on providing an overview and explaining different issues, perspectives and areas of debate.

Part of a research proposal: A well-researched overview of the main issues shows that you are well informed about the current state of research in this field. In this type of review it is common to focus on gaps in the literature to justify the need for research and to show that it will be an original contribution.

Part of a thesis: In a thesis, the literature review is the logical bridge from the introduction to the method or approach. The review justifies your research and shows how the work of others has influenced your approach and decisions.

1. Finding material

- Consult your liaison librarian if necessary
- Find up-to-date material
- Keep records of everything and label notes clearly
- Only handle material once: record referencing details as you go

- Be selective, especially for short reviews
- Follow up references from items that you find useful
- Only review material that is relevant to your particular focus

2. Taking Notes

Begin by compiling an annotated bibliography. For each item you read, identify:

- the focus
- the writer's argument, thesis or main findings
- the strengths and weaknesses (for example, in terms of practice, argument, design and quality of evidence)
- the relevance of this item to your own research.

Make notes in your own words on to a computer document, so that you can copy and paste straight from your notes to your review. Always include the page numbers.

3. Planning and organisation

A literature review is an essay, organised according to topics or themes. Use sub-headings for each section. Do not present the results of your research by working through each book or journal article one by one, as you would for an annotated bibliography. To plan a coherent structure, analyse your notes to identify patterns and themes that will be the basis for your topics. Then organise your topics into a logical sequence of ideas. An integrated structure helps you to synthesise information and make points relative to the field. There are many possible ways of organising a literature review, such as:

- Comparing theories, perspectives or competing models
- Explaining different issues or key concepts
- Comparing different approaches or methods
- Discussing key developments in the history of the area under investigation.

4. Writing tips

The body of a literature review is written in academic paragraphs. Make the point of each paragraph in an opening topic sentence that contributes to your overall argument. Support the topic sentences with reasoning and evidence.

Do not start paragraphs with a quotation or summary of what a certain writer thinks: evidence from the literature comes after the topic sentence. Unless your subject requires quotation from primary sources, keep direct quotation to a minimum. Instead, paraphrase and summarise the words of others.

Group together bibliographical items if their writers all agree, for example:

Several researchers provide similar advice about the best way to structure a literature review (Anderson & Poole, 1998; Day & Gastel, 2006; Dunleavy, 2002; Emerson & McPherson, 1996).

Use factual material to support your points, but do not write paragraphs that simply recount facts. Do not produce a simple history of the topic and do not write long passages of narrative: you are reviewing, not recounting.

If you need to include graphs or tables, label them clearly, number them and mention them in your text.

5. Evaluating

Most literature reviewers are expected to evaluate what they read. This may mean identifying errors in a writer's logic or practice, but it also means commenting on what is valuable and noteworthy. Provide reasons for your judgements and adopt a professional and courteous tone when discussing the work of others.

Your assessment of the works you review should be explicit. Most disciplines require you to write in the third

person, but remember any comment that is not ascribed to another person is your opinion, for example:

It is clear that Smith's (2009) approach to this type of investigation is the most likely to produce accurate results: unlike Jones (2006) and Brown (2008), she takes into account important variables such as the age and socio-economic class of the subjects.

6. Introductions and conclusions

In the introduction to a stand-alone review, introduce the topic and explain the aims and objectives of the review. If your review is a specific assignment task, a thesis statement may be appropriate. Briefly explain the topics to be covered, in the order in which you present them. Conclude the review by summarising your main points to show how the findings answer the question or fulfil the task. If there is no specific task, summarise your main findings.

In a thesis chapter, you may wish to use the introduction to mention the specific aims of the review (if, for example, you are focusing on methods or identifying a gap). Do not repeat the background information already provided in the first thesis chapter. Justify your selection process if you have made a narrow selection from a range of possible texts. Explain the topics to be covered in the order in which you present them. Conclude the review by summarising your main points to show that you have fulfilled your specific aim(s). Briefly outline the implications of your findings for the thesis as a whole.