

How to Write a Literature Review

What is a literature review?

- Focuses on a specific topic of interest.
- Stand-alone literature review paper OR background and foundation for a study.
- Not just a summary of several articles that you have reviewed. It goes well beyond merely summarizing and explaining the state of the art literature.
- Provides a critical analysis of the relationship among different works in relation to the topic of interest.
- Combines both summary and synthesis, often within specific conceptual categories.
- Allows you to gain a critical understanding of your field.

What is the purpose of writing a literature review?

- To provide an easy access to a summary and overview of quality articles and relevant, meaningful, important ideas and approaches.
- To provide an excellent starting point for researchers beginning to do research in a new area.
- To explore ways that others have solved similar questions/problems.
- To ensure that researchers do not duplicate works that have already been done.
- To highlight key findings, understand the relationship between the various contributions, identify and discuss contradictions, and determine gaps or unanswered questions.
- To identify recommended research areas and directions. By identifying strengths and weakness, you will be able to think about what has not/needs to be done in your field.
- Demonstrates your scholarly rigor:
 - ✓ Undergraduate level: backing your points up with appropriate, authoritative sources
 - ✓ Masters Level: demonstrating that you understand how knowledge is created
 - ✓ PhD Level: demonstrating that you can create new, original knowledge

What is the structure of a literature review?

- Introduction:
 - Explains the focus and establishes the importance of the subject, along with the objectives of the literature review.
 - It may provide very brief background to provide the context of the subject.
- Body:
 - Summarizes, evaluates, and synthesises the current state of knowledge in the field.
 - Traces the intellectual progression of the field, including major debates.
 - Provides arguments that will justify the proposed research objectives.
 - Might give a new interpretation of materials and approaches in relation to each other.
 - Describes the relationship of each work to the others.
 - If possible, resolves conflicts amongst seemingly contradictory previous studies.

iii. Conclusion:

- Summarizes all the evidence presented and shows its significance.
- Highlights gaps and indicates how previous research leads to your own research project and chosen methodology.
- It acts as an introduction to your own research and locates your own research within the context of existing literature and existing gaps.
- Identifies areas of controversy in the literature.
- It should suggest practical applications and implications of the research.
- Formulates questions that need further research.

How to think critically?

Ask: Why? How does that work? What's that made of? What's that for? What does that mean?
But X says...! How do you know? So what? Says who? What happens if...?

- Provenance: Are the author's arguments supported by evidence [e.g. historical material, case studies, statistics, recent scientific findings]? Is the research aim achieved?
- Methodology: Were the techniques used to identify, gather, and analyze the data appropriate to addressing the research problem? Was the sample size appropriate? Were the results effectively interpreted and reported? Was it a strong or a weak research model?
- Objectivity: Is the author's perspective even-handed or prejudicial? Is contrary data considered or is certain pertinent information ignored to prove the author's point?
- Value: Are the author's arguments and conclusions convincing? Does the work ultimately contribute in any significant way to an understanding of the subject?
- Your take: What can you take from it? How will this research help with your own research? What needs to be avoided? What are you doing differently?

How to develop the literature review?

- i. Problem formulation: Define your subject and the scope of the review.
- ii. Literature search: Finding materials relevant to the subject being explored.
- iii. Data evaluation: Determining which literature makes a significant contribution to the understanding of the topic.
- iv. Organizing: Analyse, interpret and organize the structure of the literature review.

How to organize the literature review?

- i. Focus on your topic:
 - ✓ What interests you?
 - ✓ What interests others?
 - ✓ What time span of research will you consider?
- ii. Read and evaluate
 - ✓ What assumptions do most/some researchers seem to be making?
 - ✓ What methodologies do they use? What testing procedures, subjects, and materials are tested?

- ✓ Evaluate and synthesize the research findings and conclusions drawn.
 - ✓ Note experts in the field: names/labs that are frequently referenced.
 - ✓ Note conflicting theories, results, and methodologies.
 - ✓ Watch for popularity of theories and how this has/has not changed over time.
- iii.* Note and synthesis
- ✓ Findings that are common/contested.
 - ✓ Two or three important trends in the research.
 - ✓ The most influential theories.
 - ✓ Develop a synthesis.
- iv.* Organize the review
- ✓ Develop headings/subheadings, especially in long reviews.
 - ✓ Place your ideas and findings into the heading.
 - ✓ If your review is long, provide an overview near the beginning of the review.
 - ✓ Near the beginning of a review, state explicitly what will and will not be covered.
 - ✓ Use transitions to help trace your argument.
- v.* Summarize and Synthesize
- ✓ Summarize and compare the literature in table or concept map format.
 - ✓ Remind the different categories of study reviewed.
 - ✓ Present applications and implications
 - ✓ Plan to suggest specific directions for future research near the end of the review

Finishing Touches?

- Revisit and edit your work.
- Read out loud:
 - ✓ Need for punctuation marks to signal pauses or divisions within sentences.
 - ✓ Grammatical errors.
 - ✓ Ambiguity in the sentences.
- Comprehensiveness:
 - ✓ Cover all the important, up-to-date, and pertinent studies.
 - ✓ Recent literature.
 - ✓ High impact journals and reviews.
- Citations:
 - ✓ Correctly cited in the text in the appropriate style.
 - ✓ Check to make sure that you have not plagiarized either by failing to cite a source of information, or by using words quoted directly from a source.
- Text should be written in a clear and concise academic style; it should not be descriptive in nature or use the language of everyday speech.
- There should be no grammatical or spelling errors.
- The text and the organization must feel coherent and maintain a consistent logic. Make certain that each section links logically to the one before and after.
- Sentences should flow smoothly and logically. Check the flow of your arguments for coherence.

- Subheadings to organize the review is recommended.
- Use quotes sparingly.
- Keep your own voice and style.
- Be sure to represent the author's information or opinions when paraphrasing.

What are the common mistakes?

- The review is not coherent.
- The review is not focused on most important facets of the study.
- The review does not relate literature to the study.
- Too few references or outdated references are cited and recent references are less present.
- The review is not written in author's own words.
- The review reads like a series of disjointed summaries.
- The review does not argue a point; digresses too much.
- The review is written in a sophisticated pompous language that makes it difficult to follow.
- The review discusses too broad or too narrow of a topic.

What does plagiarism include?

- Using another writer's words or ideas without proper citation.
- Citing a source but reproducing the exact word without quotation marks.
- Borrowing the structure of another author's phrases without giving the source.
- Borrowing all or part of another researcher's paper.
- Using paper-writing service or having a friend write the paper.

Resources and Additional Readings

- [1] <https://www.lib.uoguelph.ca/get-assistance/writing/specific-types-papers/writing-literature-review>
- [2] Writing a literature review-Faculty of Medical Sciences, Dr Adam Potts, Newcastle University
- [3] <https://library.concordia.ca/help/writing/literature-review.php>
- [4] <http://advice.writing.utoronto.ca/types-of-writing/literature-review/>
- [5] <https://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/literaturereview>
- [6] <shsu.edu/mcnair-scholars-program/documents/LiteratureReview.ppt>
- [7] <http://www.paklag.org/6-Writing%20and%20presenting%20literature%20review-Khalid.ppt>
- [8] <http://www.duluth.umn.edu/~hrallis/guides/researching/litreview.html>