

Writing a Literature Review

Writing Centre Learning Guide

At some point in your university study, you may be asked to review the literature on a certain subject or in a particular area. Such a review involves comparing different writers' ideas or perspectives on a topic and evaluating these ideas, all in relation to your own work. A literature review differs from an article review in that it involves writing about several writers' ideas, rather than evaluating a single article. It is also different to an annotated bibliography, which is usually a series of short reflections on individual pieces of writing.

Introduction

The literature review enables you and your reader to get an overview of a certain subject, so that it is clear who the main writers are in the field, and which main points need to be addressed. It should be an evaluative piece of writing, rather than just a description. This means that you need to weigh up arguments and critique ideas, rather than just providing a list of what different writers have said. It is up to you to decide what the reader needs to know on the topic, but you should only include the main pieces of writing in this area; a literature review does not need to include everything ever written on the topic. The most important thing is to show how the literature relates to your own work.

You may be writing a literature review as part of a thesis, or as an exercise in itself. Whatever the reason, there are many benefits to writing a literature review. It provides an opportunity to:

- identify a gap in previous research
- outline the main arguments in your field
- show that you are familiar with the literature on your topic
- indicate who the main writers are in a particular area
- evaluate previous studies
- position your work in relation to other writers
- identify areas of controversy
- support your own work by citing other authors
- highlight current literature and use older sources where relevant
- see what previous methodologies have been used and to avoid making the same mistakes as previous researchers
- demonstrate that you can do research
- avoid plagiarism and demonstrate your referencing skills
- provide a clear theoretical framework

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- demonstrate your understanding of the key ideas and concepts in your topic
- define your terms, drawing on other writers' definitions
- make you more confident that your area of research is worth studying.

(adapted from Bruce 2002; Clerehan 1999; CQUniversity 2010; Leedy & Ormrod 2005; Littrell 2003; Roberts & Taylor 2002; Study and Learning Centre, RMIT 2005; Swales & Feak 1994)

What to include

There are many types of literature that you could include in a review, but as far as possible you should use **primary sources**. i.e. you should refer to original works, rather than using secondary sources in which you read someone else's opinion of a work. Remember that you are talking about what other people have written about a topic, so **the topic itself is your main focus**, rather than the writer. Everything should always relate clearly to your own research question.

You should explain clearly why you have chosen to review certain pieces of literature and not others. Are the writings you have chosen the main works in this area, for example, or do they exemplify a particular methodology which you will use in your own research project? In general, you should only include academic sources. It can be hard to tell whether a piece of writing is academic or not, especially if you find it on the Internet. The following checklist may help you.

Academic sources checklist

Source	Yes	No
Is the article peer reviewed/refereed? i.e. Have other scholars in the field recommended that it be published? Journals and conference proceedings will usually state whether their articles are peer reviewed.		
Is there a reference list/bibliography, with matching in-text references?		
Who is the author? Are they linked to a university or a research institute, or possibly a government department (such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics)?		
Does the text look academic? An academic website will usually only have advertisements to academic products such as books or dictionaries, rather than to, say, holiday websites.		
Is the text written in formal language?		
Does the text use paragraphs and headings?		
Who is the publisher? Are they academic (e.g. xxx University Press)?		
If you are using a website, is there an author and a copyright date (often at the bottom of the page)?		

(based on Monash University 2011)

How to conduct the literature review

1. Select your topic (usually in conjunction with a lecturer or supervisor)
2. Put your topic into a context. What background needs to be included? Where does your topic fit into the wider context of research in the area?
3. Search for relevant information:
 - Examine the keywords of your question/topic: exactly what do you need to know?

- Identify themes in your topic
 - Isolate keywords for these themes together with their synonyms
 - Decide which types of literature best address your themes
 - Search for literature
 - Library databases and search feature
 - Google Scholar
 - Lecturers' recommendations
 - Friends' suggestions
 - Bibliographies and reference lists at the end of books or articles
 - Identify key authors if possible (through reference lists or by seeing which articles are cited most on Google Scholar)
4. Keep a record of all your references, using the style you will use in your final review
 5. Always relate all your literature to your research question, essay or report

(The above points are based on CQUniversity 2010 and Leedy & Ormrod 2005)

How to evaluate the literature

Things to consider		Yes	No
Content	Is the article easy to understand?		
	Does it use good arguments?		
	Is evidence given for the claims made?		
	Does the article make clear any limitations? (This is a good thing for an article to do.)		
	Is the writing biased?		
Context in discipline	Is this one of the key articles in the discipline?		
	Does the writer agree with other writers?		
	Does the writer disagree with other writers?		
Methodology	Is the methodology appropriate for the study?		
	Is enough information given for another researcher to replicate the study?		
	Was the sample size adequate?		
Author	Is this a reputable, academic author?		
	Does the writer refer to other literature to support some of their claims?		
Relevance	Is the research recent?		
	Is the purpose of the research similar to your own?		
	Was the study conducted under similar circumstances to your own subject?		
	Can you draw on the research for your own work?		

(The above points are based on CQUniversity 2010)

How to take notes of your literature

Some writers find it helpful to make a table of all their sources, varying the headings to suit their own work and discipline.

Example 1: Sciences/Experimental focus

Author	Year	Type of study	Sample	Design	Data collection approach	Key findings
		e.g. quantitative				
		e.g. qualitative				

(Roberts & Taylor 2002)

Example 2: Humanities/Theoretical focus

Author	Year	Type of work	Strengths	Weaknesses	Relevance to own study
		Journal article	Range of issues	Lack of depth	Similar ideas but too wide ranging

How to organise the review

As with any piece of writing, your literature review should include an introduction and a conclusion. After that, it is up to you how you group your literature. Remember, your focus should usually be on the topic you are reviewing, rather than on individual writers. That means that you can group the pieces of literature in order to make particular points, and you can refer to individual writers more than once in the review. The choices are limitless, but here are a few ideas. You could group by:

- main themes
- methodology
- theories
- types of study
- main writers in the field
- chronology (i.e. development of theories over the years)

(based on Cone & Foster 1993, p. 108, and Leedy & Ormrod 2005, p. 79)

Remember to state your goals clearly in the introduction, and address them again in the conclusion. Above all, always relate your research to the literature under discussion.

Further resources

<http://emedia.rmit.edu.au/learninglab/content/literature-review-overview>

<http://libguides.library.cqu.edu.au/content.php?pid=9872&sid=64790>

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