

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Literature reviews

- are an integral part of graduate studies to help you become fully conversant with a topic area
- may be a stand alone paper or part of a research paper or proposal
- present a survey of scholarly articles, books and other sources that provides a summary, synthesis and critical evaluation of key ideas and work on a topic area.
- present a big picture or overview of significant work done on a topic
- enable you to gain deep understanding and insight by standing on the shoulders of giants
- help you prepare for further original research by analysis of the current state of research on a topic
- take time, patience, a clear mind and good organizational skills

A good literature review demonstrates

THOROUGHNESS – you have looked at key scholars and studies, current and classic research, you have explored key aspects of the topic. *skills: search, note taking, analysis, organization*

QUALITY & RELIABILITY – articles are mostly from peer-reviewed journals, accuracy of citations. *skills: search, note-taking, cross-checking, organization*

SYNTHESIS –

LIT REVIEW VOICE – YOUR OWN TAKE ON THIS LITERATURE AS WELL.

The 2 stages of a literature review

STEP 1: The research process

SELECT - focus the topic area • develop topic statement

SEARCH - find articles

SCAN - summarize • analyze • synthesize • find patterns

STEP 2: The writing process

WRITE - draft introduction • body • conclusion

CITE - keep track of references

REVISE - coherence, accuracy, clarity, grammar, APA conventions

WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW : RESEARCH PROCESS

A. FINDING A TOPIC → FOCUSING

Focus the topic – not so broad there is too much to cover, nor so narrow there isn't enough material. However, a literature review on a broad topic is quite possible and may be the place you want to begin.

Brainstorm - mind map aspects of the topic

Preliminary database search - quick overview of related issues

Write a research topic statement - an encapsulation of the scope of your literature review.

Revise this as you search the library and scan articles.

Expect this process to be cyclical – as you scan articles you will expand your mind map and refocus your topic. This will give you leads for better keyword searches and more relevant articles, which will help you further refine your topic.

Research Tips

1. **Don't start with electronic searches unless you are familiar with the literature already.**
2. **Library as a resource:**
 - **Talk to a Subject Specialist** at the library to develop your mind-map and get help to do effective searches.
 - **Use keywords from abstracts and descriptors** from search results to expand your search.
 - **Become best friends with relevant databases.** A library specialist will help you identify databases and journals that are most relevant to your topic area. Browse these to find out how they are set-up, and what search functions they offer.
3. **Begin with the most current research.** These will give you the latest perspectives on a topic, and will point you to key studies you ought to read.
4. **Explore bibliographies** of books and articles you read – what works and scholars are often cited? This gives you a good idea of who and what is relevant and important in the field.
5. **Look for review articles** as they will have done a lot of reading and synthesis for you – there is no need to invent the wheel; use your time better to analyse, trace patterns, find new insights and add to these reviews with later studies.
6. **Identify landmarks** – are you getting a sense of who are the key scholars, how they are aligned with respect to each other in the positions they take on the topic? What are the main theories relevant to this topic, what are the key studies everyone refers to? What are the current debates?
7. **Peer-reviewed journals** contain articles reviewed by experts in the field before they are accepted for publication. Avoid newspapers, magazines and non-peer reviewed journals unless your subject area requires it; e.g. media studies, journalism, performance art. However, even here, while current information and trends might be culled from these sources, search peer-reviewed journals for in-depth studies and explorations.
8. **Wikipedia** is not a reliable reference, although it can be a handy reference for ideas of what to search for in more reliable sources.
9. **Work in Stages**
 - **FIRST PASS** is a broad and general survey to orient yourself to the field and topic, to find out the main theories/frameworks, the key scholars, and their principal publications.
 - **SECOND PASS** - a more detailed, selective process of reading books & articles you have narrowed down as most relevant. You take notes and make summaries of your readings.

B. READING • ANALYSIS • SYNTHESIS

Information is useless if it is not easily recalled and accessed. Make sure you have a good system to manage the notes you take and to keep track of your references. This makes it easier to analyse and evaluate the information and to synthesize it to find patterns, connections and trends.

Find a content organizing system that works for you:

- **END notes and REFWORKS**
- **3X5 cards** – great for making notes of key information on each article you read. Write the article citation on one side and main points on the other. You can then shuffle the cards as you need, organizing them in themes, methodologies, and trends. They also make a handy reference when you are writing rather than sifting constantly through large stacks of paper or electronic articles.
- **Excel worksheet** – electronic version of the cards. It takes a little effort to set up and begin using the worksheet, but it really pays off later because you can sort the information quickly and easily.

Make notes as you read

Scan articles for an overview - check out abstract, headings

Group articles in categories – Themes, theories, methodology, topic aspects

Make notes –:

1. citation
2. main point
3. definitions, key terms
4. Kind of reference—essay, synthesis of literature, study
5. theoretical framework
6. methodology – quantitative, qualitative etc, basic profile of study
7. key findings & position - note any important statistics
8. links to other articles
9. questions that come up as you read
10. quotations you might use – only brief ones.

Evaluate what you read

1. How do people study this question? If the results are not what you would expect is this a function of how the research is designed?
2. Are there alternative explanations for results?
3. Do researchers make unwarranted assumptions?
4. Do they ignore certain results? (e.g., usually those that do not support their hypothesis)
5. Do they inappropriately interpret results?
6. What is especially relevant or innovative?
7. How is this study useful or important?

***HINT:** Authors often discuss limitations, unexplored issues, and suggestions for future research in their Discussion section.*

C. ORGANIZATION

Organizing a lit review is one of the most important elements:

- What is my topic statement – have I focused it on specific aspects of the topic? Does it address a clear issue?
- The literature can be organized by themes, theories, methodologies, time periods, etc.
 - What are the key THEORIES or ideas about my topic and issue? Who are the principal researchers and what are their findings?
 - Are there patterns and links between ideas – which ones support each other, which contradict, which ones are antecedents to others, which ones follow from others? Look for:
 - THEMES or ISSUES that link articles
 - alternative SOLUTIONS that address the topic/issue
 - GAPS areas not covered sufficiently or pointed to as needing more research
 - TRENDS – is there a dominant viewpoint that is taking shape and why?
 - DEBATES, conflicting opinions and data.

- You can use any of these aspects to focus the organization of your review. Having looked at the research, what perspective on your topic statement will you present?

WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW : WRITING PROCESS

A. WRITING AN INTRODUCTION

an overview or roadmap of the literature review

Keep your introduction brief and to the point. Your aim is to orient the reader to the topic area, and the direction and structure of your review. Here are the main aspects to cover:

CONTEXT - Present relevant background information. This helps the reader understand the topic area its relation to its field, and helps locate your choice in relation to the field as well.

PURPOSE –

SCOPE - Present range & limitations of the review.

STRUCTURE - outline the organization of the paper

B. THE BODY

OUTLINE - each section covers a different aspect of the topic, what is my organization pattern, how many sub-headings? APA outlines how to organize the layers for subheadings.

ORGANIZE - select notes to use in each section, arrange according to themes, to types of literature (reviews, conceptual papers, empirical studies etc.), methodologies, main findings, contrasting perspectives etc. There is no one way.

Writing tips

Signposting - use clear topic sentences and transitions to help the reader follow ideas. Use summary sentences in each section that underscores the significance of what you have synthesized, i.e. it should answer a ‘so what’ question in response to your presentation.

Evidence - use in-text citations

Quotes - only if you must, to emphasize a point. Keep quotes very brief and incorporate them into your sentences using quote marks to indicate them.

Selectivity – present only points directly relevant to the review’s focus

Paraphrase - use your own words to avoid plagiarism discussion of the studies you have read – this can be organized chronologically, thematically or methodologically. Your choice of what organizational pattern to follow depends on the topic.

Subheads – using subheads to guide the organization can make it easier to write and to follow.

C. CONCLUSION - summarize main points to clarify the ‘state of the art’ for the topic. Point out existing gaps and directions for future research and practice.

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Modifying Writing Center handout