

Writing a Literature Review

What is a Literature Review?

A literature review is a discussion of information that is already published. The author of a literature review will collect articles and other sources of information on the topic and will then summarize, synthesis, and/or critique the information found.

- A summary will explain the important information from the source
- A synthesis will interpret the information and apply it to the author's topic
- A critique will evaluate the sources and what they did and did not do well

Why are Literature Reviews written?

Literature reviews provide background knowledge about the topic and allow the author to give evidence as to why the current research is being completed. They are commonly the first piece written before original research is finalized or presented. The literature review's number of sources and the detail provided helps give the author more credibility because it shows that they are well informed on the topic.

Readers can also use them to gather information on the topic. When researching, looking at published literature reviews can lead you to sources that you can then find, read, and use in your literature review. However, it is necessary that you find the original sources and read them!

Who writes Literature Reviews?

Literature reviews are most common in the sciences and social sciences but are occasionally written in the humanities. They are often a part of a longer work; however, some literature reviews are written as independent pieces.

How is it different from a research paper?

A research paper must contain a new argument that the author supports with literature and/or their findings from the experiment or study about a topic. A literature review is focused on summarizing, synthesizing, and critiquing literature. The argument made in a literature review is about the sources and how they connect to each other and inform research, not the topic or argument itself.

How is it different from an Annotated Bibliography?

An annotated bibliography is centered on the sources. It is a list of sources with a short discussion of each source. The sources are listed and discussed independently of one another in an annotated bibliography. A literature review is an organized essay centered on ideas drawn from sources. There should be connections and transitions between the sources in a literature review, whereas an annotated bibliography does not do this.

Getting Started Writing a Literature Review:

Find out:

- How many sources you need
- The type of sources you should be using
- If you should summarize, synthesize, and/or critique your sources

Begin looking for sources:

- Look at other literature reviews. This will help you learn what yours should be like, and it might even help you find sources for your own literature review. However, you must find the original sources and read them to create your own ideas about the source. You should not use a source in your literature review if your only knowledge of it comes from another literature review!
- Narrow your topic to one that interests you and is small enough for you to address it completely in your literature review. If your topic is too broad, you will not be able to address all the important sources available.
- Consider if the sources are current enough. Old sources will not be as relevant as newer sources in many cases. This does not mean that all older sources are not important. Older sources are helpful if you want to examine how the thinking on a topic has changed over the years.

Read your sources carefully and focus your ideas:

During and after reading sources, think about the following questions. By considering them, you will be able to think more deeply about your sources in the literature review.

- Are there connecting themes between sources?
- Do sources provide the same solutions or different?
- Are the authors missing something that you think is important?
- Do the sources show a current trend or debate?

Develop a Working Thesis

- Use your focused topic and your response to the questions above to develop your beginning argument.
- The thesis will present a perspective on the research and can even suggest your rationale for your own study. For example, “the research on the effects of increased cell phone use on adolescents’ development has focused primarily on social skills, leaving a gap in research on how cell phone usage affects their academic progress.”
- This thesis will probably change, but a working thesis will help keep you focused as you read your sources and write.

Organizing your Literature Review:

The Basics:

- Introduction – briefly describes the topic and possibly explains why the literature on this topic is important to review. You will also include your thesis here.
- Conclusion – Wraps up what you discussed from your sources by discussing what can be taken away from the sources as a whole. You might also make recommendations for more research. You will also want to build a connection between the literature review and your research.

The Body:

How the body of your literature review is organized will depend on your focus and topic. Some organizational formats you might consider include:

- *Chronological*: If you focus on how your topic has changed over time, you will want to talk about your oldest sources first, leading into the most recent sources. You may also find that sources from a range of years have similar ideas; in this case, you might talk about these articles together and discuss ideas in terms of trends across the years. This format will help your audience to understand what changes have occurred over time and in what order the changes have occurred.
- *Thematic*: In a thematic organization, when your sources were created has little impact on their relevancy. This means that you are thinking about a theme as a whole instead of the progression of an idea. In a thematically organized literature review, you might discuss, for example, how your topic has been portrayed in the media or how your topic has been applied in other areas.
- *Methodological*: In this format, you might discuss the ways in which different sources went about looking at the same or similar topics. Maybe all your sources studied the same thing but did it differently. Using this organization, you could discuss the methods used and their significance.

When Writing:

- *Use Selective Evidence*: Refer to your sources to support the point you are trying to make in your literature review but pick only the most important key ideas. For example, you might use sources that agree with you to support your argument. You can also use sources that disagree with you by explaining how you feel their argument is lacking or how your argument looks at something they missed.
- *But Use Quotes Carefully*: While you use sources to back you up, do not overuse quotations. Only quote when there is no other way to phrase what the original author wrote. Otherwise, paraphrase or summarize to show that you have really read, understood, and worked with the material in your sources.

- *Paraphrase and Summarize Accurately:* Make sure that your paraphrases and summaries accurately represent the author's meaning. Make sure you give credit to them for their ideas as well! If you do not, it is plagiarism.
- *Synthesize:* You do not want to only state what your sources have said; in addition to summarizing what they said, you want to state the significance of their work and connect it to your own work.
- *Keep Your Voice:* While much of a literature review is examining the work of others, make sure that your writing style remains evident. The literature review should always return to your focus as a writer and what you hope to accomplish.

Cite, Cite, Cite:

- It is essential that you give credit to your sources
- It is better to over cite than to under cite
- Make sure you are following the guidelines for your required style of citation (see our handouts on MLA, APA, and Chicago for information on these guidelines)

Revise:

- Make sure you give yourself enough time to revise and edit multiple times!
- Make sure you've met the requirements of the assignment
- Make sure your thesis matches what you wrote; chances are you will need to re-write your thesis to make it a better match
- Make sure you remove slang and informal language
- Be sure to define or remove words that will be unfamiliar to your reader

"Literature Reviews." *The Writing Center*. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2012.

<https://studylib.net/doc/7006214/writing-a-literature-review>

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Updated 2022 by Bobbi Le' Rae Valentin