

WRITING A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

What is a review of literature?

A review of literature is an account of what has been published on a topic by accredited scholars and researchers. Occasionally you might be asked to write one as a separate assignment, but more often it is part of the introduction to an essay, research report, or thesis. In writing the literature review, your purpose is to convey to your reader what knowledge and ideas have been established on a topic, and what their strengths and weaknesses are. As a piece of writing, the literature review must be defined by a guiding concept (e.g., your research objective, the problem or issue you are discussing, or your argumentative thesis). It is not just a descriptive list of the material available, or a set of summaries.

A literature review must do these things:

- a. be organized around and related directly to the thesis or research question you are developing
- b. synthesize results into a summary of what is and is not known
- c. identify areas of controversy in the literature
- d. formulate questions that need further research

The format of a review of literature may vary from discipline to discipline and from assignment to assignment. A review may be a self-contained unit -- an end in itself -- or a preface to and rationale for engaging in primary research. A review is a required part of grant and research proposals and often a chapter in theses and dissertations. Generally, the purpose of a review is to analyze critically a segment of a published body of knowledge through summary, classification, and comparison of prior research studies, reviews of literature, and theoretical articles.

Writing the Introduction

In the introduction, you should

- define or identify the general topic, issue, or area of concern, thus providing an appropriate context for reviewing the literature.
- point out overall trends in what has been published about the topic; or conflicts in theory, methodology, evidence, and conclusions; or gaps in research and scholarship; or a single problem or new perspective of immediate interest.
- establish the writer's reason (point of view) for reviewing the literature; explain the criteria to be used in analyzing and comparing literature and the organization of the review (sequence); and, when necessary, state why certain literature is or is not included (scope).

Writing the Body

In the body, you should

- group research studies and other types of literature (reviews, theoretical articles, case studies, etc.) according to common denominators such as qualitative versus quantitative approaches, conclusions of authors, specific purpose or objective, chronology, etc.
- summarize individual studies or articles with as much or as little detail as each merits according to its comparative importance in the literature, remembering that space (length) denotes significance.

Provide the reader with strong "umbrella" sentences at beginnings of paragraphs, "signposts" throughout, and brief "so what" summary sentences at intermediate points in the review to aid in understanding comparisons and analyses.

Writing the Conclusion

In the conclusion, you should

- summarize major contributions of significant studies and articles to the body of knowledge under review, maintaining the focus established in the introduction.
- evaluate the current "state of the art" for the body of knowledge reviewed, pointing out major methodological flaws or gaps in research, inconsistencies in theory and findings, and areas or issues pertinent to future study.

Conclude by providing some insight into the relationship between the central topic of the literature review and a larger area of study such as a discipline, a scientific endeavor, or a profession

Do not forget to ask yourself questions like these:

1. What is the **specific thesis, problem, or research question** that my literature review helps to define?
2. What **type** of literature review am I conducting? Am I looking at issues of theory? methodology? policy? quantitative research (e.g. on the effectiveness of a new procedure)? qualitative research (e.g. studies)?
3. What is the **scope** of my literature review? What types of publications am I using (e.g., journals, books, government documents, popular media)? What discipline am I working in (e.g., psychology, sociology, medicine)?
4. How good was my **information seeking**? Has my search been wide enough to ensure I've found all the relevant material? Has it been narrow enough to exclude irrelevant material? Is the number of sources I've used appropriate for the length of my paper?
5. Have I **critically analyzed** the literature I use? Do I synthesize the information in an original way? Instead of just listing and summarizing items, do I assess them, discussing strengths and weaknesses?
6. Have I cited and discussed studies **contrary** to my perspective?
7. Will the reader find my literature review **relevant, appropriate, and useful**?