

How to Write a Literature Review

***What is it?**

*A literature review is a summary of previous research on a topic you choose. The 'literature' is the sources you find when you do research on the subject. Unlike most essays, it does not contain a new argument about the topic.

*Instead, it summarizes and evaluates the evidence and arguments other researchers have made.

*The purpose is to explain how research relates to your topic. Thus, while it presents others' ideas, the voice is yours. The main point of a lit review is about their research and possibly how your proposed work will contribute to the discussion.

*Introduce and conclude the literature review, as well as each of your body paragraphs, using your own words and ideas. Emphasize the connection between the sources and the topic. For example, explain why an article on gender bias is relevant if the topic is writing at the college level.

***What do I do?**

1. Clarify your instructor's expectations

How many sources should you include? What type of sources should you use? Should they be current, historical, scholarly, specialized, popular, etc.?

2. Choose a topic and develop a research question; focus them in relation to the assignment. If a search generates thousands of sources, refine the terms -- if too few, broaden them.

3. Develop a working bibliography:

- For every source, create a reference entry in the assigned format.
- Read each source chosen for the lit review more than once.
- Summarize what each has to say on your topic

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4. Draft the main point as a one sentence summation of what all the research studied is saying about the topic. For example:

The current trend in treatment for congestive heart failure combines surgery and medication.

Historically, scholars of government policy in the twentieth century agree that there was little agreement in relation to its role in private affairs.

5. Find a literature review article in the same field to get a sense of how they are composed. Note the compare/contrast style used in this sample paragraph from a literature review about sexism and language:

The research by Lin (2011) is not conclusive; indeed, other studies have shown different results. For example, Hamilton (2009) asked students to complete sentences that contained gender-neutral words such as “writer,” and “pedestrian.” When asked to describe any image they had when writing the sentence, Hamilton found that people imagined 3.3 men to each woman. (University of Wisconsin-Madison Writing Center)

6. Decide how you will organize it. Here are some possible outlines:

- Chronological - the oldest research to the most current
- Methodological - what kind of studies or type of research the scholars performed
- Thematic - key ideas or questions for the topic, for example:
What is currently known? Are there any gaps? Where is there consensus or disagreement? Who are the significant researchers, historical and modern? What areas of future research have they identified as promising?
- Type of source – articles, websites, books and so on

7. Revise the main point to match the body of the paper for both the ideas discussed and the order they are presented. Here is an example:

Throughout the twentieth century, disagreement has been the rule in the discussion of government's role in private affairs; whether commenting on reproductive rights, the definition of marriage, or diet for children, researchers often take very different views.

The above statement tells a reader:

- The topic is government's role in private affairs
- The sources span the 20th century
- Research will be organized oldest to newest in three specific areas

***What do the major sections of a literature review cover?**

Introduction

Get the reader's attention; clearly explain the topic to be studied and why this topic is interesting and important. One way to do this is briefly state your reasons for reviewing the literature. In STEM fields, this section will often define a problem and demonstrate its significance. For humanities subjects, this section will often define the genres, events or concepts as well as schools of thought or criticism that will be applied. Address why certain literature has been included while other research has not. Identify the organization of the review and include the main point at the end.

Body

Follow the organizational plan previewed in the introduction. Share summaries and your interpretation of the sources as they relate to the topic. Use specific examples from them as evidence to show that what you are saying is valid but use direct quotes sparingly. Select only the most important points from sources -- cite any quotes or paraphrases in the style appropriate to the field.

Use topic sentences at the beginning of paragraphs to remind the reader of the organizational plan. Use transitional sentences at the beginning and end of each paragraph to connect points. For example:

- This is related to what another researcher noted just one year later about the frequency of gender-coded language.
- Researchers on policy in this century note the high level of disagreement around government's role in children's diets.

Conclusion

Briefly summarize what you have learned from the research. Restate the main point and summarize the body. Remember not to simply repeat the same information. Since the audience has now read the entire paper, explain what points mean in relation to discussions in the field. Indicate how what you have learned will help if you write your own research paper or why this literature review matters for the future. Thus, because a literature review is a summary of previous research on a topic you choose, it is a synthesis of two things: others' ideas and the explanation of how you will use them.