

A Brief Guide To Writing A Literature Review

What is a Review of the Literature?

A “review of the literature” is a classification and evaluation of what accredited scholars and researchers have written on a topic. Occasionally you will be asked to write one as a separate assignment, but 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 exploring, or your thesis). It is not just a descriptive list of the material available, or a set of summaries.

A literature review consists of an **overview**, a **summary**, and an **evaluation** (“critique”) of the current state of knowledge about a specific area of research. It may also include a discussion of methodological issues and suggestions for future research.

Besides enlarging your knowledge about the topic, writing a literature review lets you gain and demonstrate skills in two areas:

1. **information seeking**: the ability to scan the literature efficiently, using manual and computerized methods, to identify a set of useful articles, books and documents;
2. **critical appraisal**: the ability to apply principles of analysis to identify unbiased and valid studies.

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.

Why are Literature Reviews Important?

To become an expert in any field of endeavour, you must know your field comprehensively. Critical reviews of state-of-the-art literature permit the professional to make informed decisions, to act in an expert manner, and to set policy in his or her field of expertise.

Researchers conduct reviews of the literature to justify proposed studies, to uncover patterns of findings in the field, to enter into scientific debate, and to discover gaps in knowledge that lead to future research questions. Research reviews are often the first step toward making discoveries and social interventions in our society.

Questions to Ask Yourself About Your Review of Literature

1. Do I have a specific thesis, problem, or research question which 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., studies of neural pathways)? qualitative research (e.g., studies of loneliness among migrant workers)?
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 disciplinary databases am I searching? (e.g., nursing, psychology, sociology, medicine)?
4. How good are my information-seeking skills? 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. Is there a specific relationship between the literature I've chosen to review and the problem I've formulated?
6. Have I critically analyzed the literature I use? Do I just list and summarize authors and articles, or do I assess them? Do I discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the material I cite?
7. Have I cited and discussed studies contrary to my perspective?
8. Will the reader find my literature review relevant, appropriate, and useful?

Questions to Ask Yourself About Each Book or Article You're Reviewing

1. Has the author formulated a problem/issue?
2. Is the problem/issue ambiguous or clearly articulated? Is its significance (scope, severity, relevance) discussed?
3. What are the strengths and limitations of the way the author has formulated the problem or issue?
4. Could the problem have been approached more effectively from another perspective?
5. What is the author's research orientation (e.g., interpretive, critical science, combination)?
6. What is the author's theoretical framework (e.g., psychoanalytic, developmental, feminist)?
7. What is the relationship between the theoretical and research perspectives?
8. Has the author evaluated the literature relevant to the problem/issue? Does the author include literature taking positions s/he does not agree with?
9. In a research study, how good are the three basic components of the study design (i.e., population, intervention, outcome)? How accurate and valid are the measurements? Is the analysis of the data accurate and relevant to the research question? Are the conclusions validly based upon the data and analysis?
10. In popular literature, does the author use appeals to emotion, one-sided examples, rhetorically-charged language and tone? Is the author objective, or is s/he merely "proving" what s/he already believes?
11. How does the author structure his or her argument? Can you "deconstruct" the flow of the argument to analyze if/where it breaks down?
12. Is this a book or article that contributes to our understanding of the problem under study, and in what ways is it useful for theory or practice? What are its strengths and limitations?
13. How does this book or article fit into the thesis or question I am developing?