

Literature Reviews



What is a literature review? What should it do?

Literature reviews can vary in length and content and can be found in many different genres of writing. All disciplines use literature reviews. Most commonly, the literature review is a part of a research paper, article, book, thesis or dissertation. Sometimes your instructor may ask you to simply write a literature review as a stand-alone document. This handout will consider the literature review as a section of a larger project.

A literature review is

- An evaluation of existing research.
- An argument about where your research fits into the field.
- A way of positioning the argument for your project.

A literature review is not

- A simple summary of research.
- An encyclopedic list of research.
- A review of research not clearly connected with your project.

In the literature review, you present research (the literature) that has already been done in order to help your reader better understand the following matters:

- How your project fits in the larger scholarly conversation. You show what research has been done already in order to draw attention to what research still needs to be done.
- What research is relevant to understanding your project. Your readers need to have a sense of how you built your project.
- How your project is positioned in terms of specific scholarly questions. Your readers want to know what questions drive your inquiry.

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How can you get started on your literature review?

As you research

- Have a clear sense of your research questions.
- Understand how you came to your research questions.
- Write about what you need to explain about your research to others to convince them the project is worthwhile.
- Make sure you know where and how to find relevant research. Specifically, consider what journals, books, and reports are important for your discipline. If you don't know where to start looking, talk to your professor or talk to a Reference librarian for research help.

As you read and organize your sources

- Use citation management software to organize your sources.
- Use Double entry journals to track your responses to your sources as you read.
- Create an annotated bibliography to generate a list of summaries and evaluations of the key sources in your literature review.
- Decide before you start reading how you are going to evaluate what you read. If you ask similar questions of all of your readings, you will have a way of connecting the information in those readings.

What are some common features of a literature review?

A literature review may include the following

- Research that covers the issues of theory, research and methodology that you need to establish for your research.
- Definitions of key terms and the sources from which they are drawn.
- Descriptions of relevant debates.
- Relevant theoretical positions.

You need to position your project in relation to the literature you review. Are you:

- Extending existing research?
- Questioning existing research?
- Pulling together two or more previously unconnected threads of research?
- Applying existing research in new context?
- Bringing a new theoretical lens or interpretation to existing questions?
- Anticipating resistance to your research?

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Literature reviews can be organized in different ways.

- Thematic
- Methodological
- Chronological
- Argument based
- Theory based

What are some common conventions of a literature review?

Literature reviews should have an introduction, body, and conclusion.

Introduction

- Define or identify the issue.
- Point out overall trends in what has been published about the topic – conflicts, gaps in research, foundational research or theory, etc.
- Establish your position – or argument - for the project and the organization of the review.

Body

- Group research and theory according to the organization you have chosen (Thematic, Methodological, etc).
- Summarize and evaluate studies or articles. Each article should not necessarily get the same amount of attention – length indicates significance to your project.
- Provide clear transitions and strong organizing sentences at the start of sections or paragraphs. Providing intermediate conclusions for individual sections may be helpful.
- When necessary, state why certain literature is or is not included.

Conclusion

- Describe how your review indicates how you can intervene in the current scholarly conversation (methodological flaws, gaps in research, new theoretical lens, etc.).
- Describe how the review positions your research project.
- You may also describe the implications for how your evaluation of the literature fits in the larger area of study in the discipline or area of research.

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Example paragraph from a literature review

Bieber, Jeffrey P., and Linda K. Worley. "Conceptualizing the Academic Life: Graduate Students' Perspectives." *The Journal of Higher Education* 77.6 (2006): 1009-1035. EBSCO. Web. 1 Mar. 2011.

"Much of the research focusing on graduate education (e.g., Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Seagram, Gould, & Pyke, 1998; Tuckman, 1991) has been concentrated on structural variables (e.g., time-to-degree) or on the factors (such as the presence of mentors, fellowships, or assistantships) operating in the lives of graduate students deemed to be successful, typically defined as those who not only complete their doctoral work but also land a full-time, tenure-track position in academia or, in the case of the sciences and engineering, a position in the private sector. A small but growing body of literature attempts to move beyond analysis of single, discrete variables in order to probe more fully the graduate school experience and its complexities. Anderson (1996), Conrad, Haworth, and Millar (1993), Golde (1998), and Lovitts (2001), among others, have provided insights into how students themselves experience graduate school. The work of these researchers takes us "inside" the experience, thus providing the context necessary for a more complete understanding of graduate education."

Notes

In this paragraph, Bieber and Worley point to trends and findings in the research and cite multiple authors that are related to this trend. They are making an argument or evaluation about how certain research project connect, which will eventually allow them to show how their project fits into these bodies of research. Here, they are mostly concerned with these broad connections, but later, they go into more detail about particular sources listed here—sources that are key to their project. Most importantly, note how they synthesize (or pull together) multiple sources into one paragraph.