

Literature Reviews

What is a literature review?

A literature review is a description, summary, and critical evaluation of scholarly works on a certain topic. A literature review combines both **summary** (a recap of important information) and **synthesis** (a reorganization of that information which reflects your approach to a research problem). You may be asked to write a literature review on a certain topic for a class, or you may need to include a literature review as one part of a research paper, thesis, or dissertation.

What is the difference between an academic research paper and a literature review?

The goal of a literature review is to summarize and synthesize the previous research and arguments of other scholars, without adding new contributions.

The goal of a research paper is to develop a new argument, and typically includes some form of data collection and analysis. A research paper usually includes a literature review as one of its components (often labeled as the “Background” or “Theoretical Background” section).

Why are literature reviews necessary?

A literature review demonstrates the author’s understanding of the existing research on a topic and the author’s ability to relate previous research to their own questions or ideas. Literature reviews provide solid background for a research paper’s investigation, allowing the author to situate their own question within the larger academic conversation on a given topic. A literature review with sufficient breadth and depth reflects the credibility of the author and the author’s research.

Literature reviews address common beliefs or debates on a topic, offer definitions and frameworks necessary to understand a topic, and incorporate recent (and sometimes historical) scholarship on that topic. Because they summarize and synthesize literature on a specific topic, literature reviews can function as a general overview to that topic for readers.

Types of literature reviews

You can adopt different approaches to the literature review depending on the type of analysis underpinning your research.

Argumentative review: This type of literature review examines literature in a selective way in order to address a specific argument, assumption, or philosophical standpoint that is firmly established in the literature, typically with the goal of developing an alternative viewpoint.

Integrative review: This type of literature review generates new frameworks and perspectives on a topic. This type of literature review includes all known studies addressing a specific question or hypothesis.

Historical review: This type of literature review focuses on examining research throughout time, often starting with the first time the topic emerged in the literature and then examining how approaches to that topic have changed over time. The goal of this type of review is to provide historical context for the research question.

Methodological review: This type of literature review does not focus on scholars' findings but instead on how they came to their conclusions (the methods they used to reach their findings). This type of review is useful for exploring the validity of different types of methods used to examine a given topic and provide guidance about which methods should be used in the future.

Systematic review: This type of literature review provides an overview of evidence addressing a specific, clearly defined research question. It incorporates standardized methods for identifying and reviewing the literature that should be clearly explained in the literature review, with the goal of including all relevant studies on the given topic.

Theoretical review: This type of literature review explores the different theories used to approach a given topic, including the pros and cons of different theories, the relationships between theories, and the ways that different theories have been tested and investigated.

Steps to complete a literature review:

1. **Determine the focus of your literature review.** The focus of your literature review should be guided by your thesis statement (the main claim or argument you plan to make in the paper). Avoid topics that are too broad or too narrow. When your topic is too broad, you may have too much material to work with and find it difficult to create focus in the paper. When your topic is too narrow, you may struggle with finding enough literature to review.
2. **Find literature to review that is related to your research topic.** This can include books, journal articles, news articles, websites, etc. depending on the research topic. Literature reviews typically include **secondary sources rather than primary sources** (e.g. if you are writing a paper about the Declaration of Independence, your literature review would include books and articles *about* the Declaration of Independence, rather than the contents of the Declaration of Independence itself). Good places to look for sources are: libraries, online databases, course syllabi, Google Scholar, and the references section of relevant books and articles. Make sure to judge the quality of your sources (e.g. make sure that articles come from reputable journals or that websites are associated with reputable organizations). Wikipedia is not considered a high-quality source, but many Wikipedia articles do have sources listed in the references section that can be useful. If you need to, make contact with University Libraries' subject librarians, so they can assist you in locating databases, journals, and articles relevant to your research.
3. **Evaluate the contribution of each source.** Determine the main point or argument of each source. Consider how the source relates to your own research question. Then determine which sources are most relevant and which sources should be included in your review. Depending on the type of review you are doing, you may not need to include every source you found on a given topic, especially if multiple sources make the same or similar point. Consider page and word limits as you determine which and how many sources to include. If you are conducting an integrative or systematic review, you will include all sources that fall within your specified research parameters (something that is determined before you start searching for literature). At this stage, it can be helpful to create an **annotated bibliography** to keep track of the contributions of different sources.
4. **Synthesize.** Determine how the sources relate to each other and to your own research. Identify common and/or important themes, disagreements or different points of view among scholars,

gaps in the research, and any apparent issues with methodology or conclusions. Create an outline to help organize your ideas before you start writing. You may find that certain sources connect directly, while others have less-obvious links; review the following strategies for grouping together and discussing multiple sources.

- a. **Strategies for synthesizing literature:**
 - i. **Thematic:** Group ideas according to theme. Show how different sources are related thematically. Consider common themes that are addressed in the literature, and how different scholars have approached those themes.
 - ii. **Chronological:** Group ideas by periods of time. Consider how scholarly methods and/or scholarly thinking have changed over time.
 - iii. **Methodological:** Group ideas by method. Identify different methods that have been used to address the issue and consider whether different methods have led to different conclusions.
5. **Write the literature review.** Start with an introduction that describes the main topic and research question. Use the outline you developed in step 4 as a guide as you write the body of the literature review. Importantly, do not just write an isolated paragraph for each source. Make sure to make connections across different sources to create a coherent discussion on the topic. Conclude by explaining how your own research question or argument fits into the scholarly discussion. This allows you to create a transition from the literature review to the specifics of your own study if necessary (e.g. your methods and analysis).

Helpful tips:

1. Look at examples of literature reviews by scholars in your field to get a sense of what a literature review entails.
2. Be flexible. Writing a literature review is not a linear process. After you've started writing, you may find that you need to go back and find more literature to review or need to re-evaluate literature you've already found. You may need to change your synthesizing strategy or reorganize your sources.
3. Keep in mind that the goal of the literature review is to explain established research and situate your own research questions within the literature. Save your original ideas and analyses for other sections of the paper.
4. Lit reviews should be clearly signposted via introductions, transitions, and a conclusion/restatement that brings the threads together. Ensure that the reader knows the purpose and structure, especially in longer lit reviews.
5. Avoid repetition. If three scholars make the same or similar point, explain it one time and then cite all three scholars in the citation.
6. Avoid plagiarism by citing all sources. Remember that direct quotes and paraphrases need to be cited. Any ideas that you did not come up with yourself must be cited. Literature reviews will have a lot of citations, but should not consist *solely* of citations. Fully explain each citation and make clear connections between sources.
7. Make use of a reference management system, such as Zotero or Mendeley, as it will make your writing easier throughout your graduate process.