

Writing a Literature Review

Wilmer Writing Center

A literature review is a type of academic writing that provides an account of what has already been published by researchers and other experts in a given field. It can stand alone or serve as an introduction to a lab report or other type of research. The purpose of a literature review is to synthesize knowledge that has been established on a given topic as well as to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the research.

A literature review should:

1. Increase one's overall knowledge about a certain topic
2. Improve one's information seeking skills (scanning literature effectively and efficiently and identifying a set of useful books, articles, and other literature)
3. Expand the ability to demonstrate critical appraisal (analyzing to identify valid and unbiased studies)
4. Identify gaps in the existing literature

A literature review must:

1. Be organized and relate directly to the research topic/question
2. Synthesize literature, summarize the findings, and identify what is and is not known
3. Identify any potential areas of controversy within the literature
4. Formulate questions that may require additional research

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 on 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 discipline am I working in (e.g., nursing psychology, sociology, and medicine)?
4. How effective was my information seeking? Has my search been wide enough to ensure I have found all the relevant material? Has it been narrow enough to exclude irrelevant material? Is the number of sources I have used appropriate for the length of my paper?
5. Have I critically analyzed the literature I use? Do I follow through a set of concepts and questions, comparing items to each other in the ways they deal with them? Instead of just listing and summarizing items, do I assess them, discussing strengths and weaknesses? Do I make connections between sources?
6. Have I cited and discussed studies contrary to my perspective?
7. Will the reader find my literature review relevant, appropriate, and useful?

Ask yourself questions like these about each book or article you include:

1. Has the author formulated a problem/issue?
2. Is the problem/issue clearly defined? Is its significance (scope, severity, relevance) clearly established?
3. Could the problem have been approached more effectively from another perspective?
4. What is the author's research orientation (e.g., interpretive, critical science, combination)?
5. What is the author's theoretical framework (e.g., psychological, developmental, feminist)?
6. What is the relationship between the theoretical and research perspectives?
7. Has the author evaluated the literature relevant to the problem/issue? Does the author include literature taking positions she or he does not agree with?
8. In a research study, how good are the basic components of the study design (e.g., 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?
9. In material written for a popular readership, does the author use appeals to emotion, one-sided examples, or rhetorically-charged language and tone? Is there an objective basis to the reasoning, or is the author merely "proving" what he or she already believes?
10. How does the author structure the argument? Can you "deconstruct" the flow of the argument to see if and how it breaks down logically (e.g., in establishing cause-effect relationships)?
11. In what ways does this book or article contribute to our understanding of the problem under study, and in what ways is it useful for practice? What are the strengths and limitations?
12. How does this book or article relate to the specific thesis or question I am developing?

A literature review is a piece of discursive prose, not a list describing or summarizing one piece of literature after another. It is usually a bad sign to see every paragraph beginning with the name of a researcher. Instead, organize the literature review into sections that present themes or identify trends, including relevant theory. You are not trying to list all the material published, but to synthesize and evaluate it according to the guiding concept of your thesis or research question

All information in this guide was retrieved directly from:

Taylor, Dena. "The literature review: A few tips on conducting it." *University of Toronto*. Retrieved from:
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