

Writing the Literature Review

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Learning Objectives

At the conclusion of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Begin to write your literature review
- Understand and be able to use the appropriate publication guidelines

Writing the literature review

You have discovered, retrieved, evaluated, synthesized, and organized the information you need for your literature review. It's time to turn that stack of articles and papers and notes into a literature review. It's time to start writing.

The graduate-level literature review is about both content and form. In terms of content, keep in mind that your literature review is intended to:

- Set up a theoretical framework for your own research
- Show a clear understanding of the key concepts/ideas/studies/models related to your topic
- Demonstrate knowledge about the history of your research area and any related controversies
- Illustrate that you are able to evaluate and synthesize the work of others
- Clarify significant definitions and terminology
- Develop a space in your discipline for your research

In other words, literature reviews

...clearly describe the questions that are being asked. They also locate the research within the ongoing scholarly dialogue. This is done by summarizing current understandings and by discussing why what we already knows leads to the need for the present research. Literature reviews also define the primary concepts. While this information can appear in any order, these are the elements in all literature reviews. ([Loseke, 2017, p.67](#))

Some questions to ask yourself when you begin to write your first draft include:

- How will my literature review be organized: Chronologically, thematically, conceptually, methodologically or a combination?
- What section headings will I be using?
- How do the various studies relate to each other?
- What contributions do they make to the field?
- What are the limitations of a study/where are the gaps in the research?
- And finally but most importantly, how does my own research fit into what has already been done?

Some questions to ask after the first draft:

- Is there a logical flow from section to section, paragraph to paragraph, sentence to sentence?
- Does the content proceed from topic to topic?
- Does your conclusion match your introduction?
- Were you consistent in documenting and using the correct citation style?

Main features

No matter how you decide to organize your literature review (chronologically, thematically, etc.), it follows a format you will immediately recognize: **Introduction, Body, Conclusion**. We will look at each section individually.

Introduction

The introduction to the literature review contains a statement or statements about the overall topic of your dissertation or theses. This might be an paragraph or section that lets your reader know what your literature review is going to address. You will describe how the literature review will be organized (for example, what are the main points you are going to address and in what order will they appear?). You may choose to briefly describe search criteria (keywords, databases, journals) in this section, or you may do it in different parts of the review. It is suggested that this introductory section be no longer than two pages in length. The purpose is to lead your reader further into the body of the literature review.

In the introduction, you will:

- Define or identify the general topic, issue, or area of concern thereby providing an appropriate context for the remainder of the review
- Point out overall trends in what has been previously published on the topic; or conflicts in theory, methodology, evidence, conclusions, or gaps in research and scholarship
- Establish your reason for reviewing this research (**point of view**); explain the criteria used to search the literature; the organization of the review (**sequence**); and – if necessary – why certain literature either is or is not included (**scope**)
- Demonstrate how your research either closes a gap in the literature, extends earlier work, or replicates an important study thereby contributing new knowledge to your discipline.

More tips for the Introduction:

1. Consider presenting a historical frame of reference
2. Point out a landmark or seminal study
3. Provide definitions for important terms
4. Describe how your literature review was conducted
5. Describe any inclusion or exclusion criteria used

Body

Some general tips for writing the body of your literature review:

- Start broad and then narrow to show how past research relates to your project.
- Make it clear to your reader where you're going, follow a logical progression of ideas
- When appropriate, cite two or more sources for a single point but avoid long strings of references for a single point.
- Use quotes sparingly.
- Keep your own formal academic voice throughout and keep the review focused and objective, following a logical structure.
- Point out consistent findings AND emphasize stronger studies over weaker ones. Point out important strengths and weaknesses of research studies OR contradictions and inconsistent findings.
- Implications and suggestions for further research, or where there are gaps in the current literature, should be specific.

Conclusion

Summarize your literature review, discuss implications, and create a space for future or further research needed in this area. Like the introduction, this section should be around 3-5 pages in length. How do you know when you're done?

Can you answer these 11 questions:

1. Have you clearly defined your topic and audience?
2. Did you search and re-search the literature?
3. Took notes while reading?
4. Chosen the type of review you want to write?
5. Have you kept the review focused throughout?
6. Were you critical and consistent in your evaluation and synthesis?
7. Is the structure of your review logical?
8. Did you make use of feedback?
9. Were you able to stay relevant and objective throughout?
10. Did you maintain an objective voice?
11. Did you cite current and older studies? ([Pautasso, 2013](#)).

List of references

The reference list of publications used in your literature review serves two purposes. First, it provides your reader with means to evaluate the quality of your research. Second, accurately and correctly citing all the sources used in your work protects you from possible accusations of plagiarism. Using the words or ideas of others without referencing your source is a very serious academic offense.

The reference list is a reflection of the thoroughness of your review. It also allows others to retrieve the publications you cite. Errors made in authors' names, journal or article titles, page numbers and dates may present barriers to retrieval of articles and may prevent giving credit to authors for their work. Each reference should be checked carefully for errors. Every in-text citation must have a listing in the references and every title in the reference list should connect to an in-text citation.

Tips for Structure

The literature reviews generally move from general to more specific, taking in all the elements mentioned previously.

Build your story by identifying areas of consensus and areas of divergence. For example

- It seems there is agreement among researchers...
- Much debate exists on the issue of...

Possible structures:

Distant to close – the most distantly related to your work leading to the most closely related to your work.

Chronological – earliest related work to most recent related work.

Compare and contrast valid approaches, features, characteristics, theories – that is, one approach, then a 2nd approach, followed by a 3rd approach.

Finally, consider the use of summary paragraphs throughout the body of the review. For example:

- In summary, the evidence presented demonstrates that...
- Rather, this literature supports the theory that...
- Consequently, the population studied may experience...
- However, alternative ideas and findings suggest...

An Example and A Checklist

An example of the possible structure for a literature review:

Introduction

Establish the importance of the topic

Number and type of people affected

Seriousness of the impact

Physical, psychological, economic, social aspects

Definitions of key terms

Literature review strategies

Description of the extent and nature of the literature

Overview of the organization of the rest of the review

Body of the review

Topic 1

Supporting evidence

Topic 2

Supporting evidence

Topic 3

Supporting evidence

Summary of the review

Discussion

Conclusions

Implications

Suggestions for future research

List of references

After you have written your first draft, use this checklist to review your progress:

1. Fill in the topic outline with brief notes.
2. Do not write a string of annotations.
3. Cite two or more sources for a single point, but avoid long strings of references for a single point. Consider using e.g. when there are a large number of sources for a single point.
4. Use quotations sparingly.
5. Emphasize stronger studies over weaker ones.
6. Point out strengths and weaknesses of the research cited.
7. Point out consistent findings in a body of literature.
8. Point out contradictions or inconsistent findings as well.
9. Identify gaps.
10. Indicate when previous literature reviews are cited.
11. Implications and suggestions for future research should be specific, not just 'more research is needed.'

In Summary

Like any effective argument, the literature review must have some kind of structure. For example, it might begin by describing a phenomenon in a general way along with several studies that demonstrate it, then describing two or more competing theories of the phenomenon, and finally presenting a hypothesis to test one or more of the theories. Or it might describe one phenomenon, then describe another phenomenon that seems inconsistent with the first one, then propose a theory that resolves the inconsistency, and finally present a hypothesis to test that theory. In applied research, it might describe a phenomenon or theory, then describe how that phenomenon or theory applies to some important real-world situation, and finally suggest a way to test whether it does, in fact, apply to that situation.

Looking at the literature review in this way emphasizes a few things. First, it is extremely important to start with an outline of the main points that you want to make, organized in the order that you want to make them. The basic structure of your argument then should be apparent from the outline itself. Second, it is important to emphasize the structure of your argument in your writing. One way to do this is to begin the literature review by summarizing your argument even before you begin to make it, "In this article, I will describe two apparently contradictory phenomena, present a new theory that has the potential to resolve the apparent contradiction, and finally present a novel hypothesis to test the theory." Another way is to open each paragraph with a sentence that summarizes the main point of the paragraph and links it to the preceding points. These opening sentences provide the "transitions" that many beginning researchers have difficulty with. Instead of beginning a paragraph by launching into a description of a previous study, such as "Williams (2004) found that...", it is better to start by indicating something about why you are describing this particular study. Here are some simple examples:

Another example of this phenomenon comes from the work of Williams (2004).

Williams (2004) offers one explanation of this phenomenon.

An alternative perspective has been provided by Williams (2004).

We used a method based on the one used by Williams (2004).

Finally, remember that your goal is to construct an argument for why your research question is interesting and worth addressing—not necessarily why your favorite answer to it is correct. In other words, your literature review must be balanced. If you want to emphasize the generality of a phenomenon, then of course you should discuss various studies that have demonstrated it. However, if there are other studies that have failed to demonstrate it, you should discuss them too. Or if you are proposing a new theory, then of course you should discuss findings that are consistent with the theory. However, if there are other findings that are inconsistent with it, again, you should discuss them too. It is acceptable to argue that the balance of the research supports the existence of a phenomenon or is consistent with a theory (and that is usually the best that researchers in psychology can hope for), but it is not acceptable to ignore

contradictory evidence. Besides, a large part of what makes a research question interesting is uncertainty about its answer. ([University of Minnesota, 2016](#)).

Additional resources

[Doing a literature review](#) / University of Leicester

Texas A&M Writing Centre



[Watch on YouTube](#)

Practice

Question 1

What writing problems do you see in the following introductory paragraph?

In the opening chapter I have attempted to outline and motivate my study of graduate student writing in a school of nursing [or education]. The purpose of this chapter is to relate my study to previous scholarly attempts to describe, analyze and explain academic writing and the processes of its acquisition. One purpose here is to establish what has been revealed in other academic contexts as a basis for the findings of my study. Another purpose is to attempt a critical evaluation of the research so far.

Potential Problems

- The tone and style of a literature review is formal, generally written in the third person
- In the first sentence, 'motivate' may not be the correct term. Perhaps 'inform' would be more appropriate here
- Although 'purpose' of the chapter is mentioned several times, it is unclear if the literature review has one purpose or several purposes. If the only purpose of this review is to critically evaluate previous research, that should be stated more clearly
- Later sentences and paragraphs must also:
 - Establish your reason for undertaking this research and your point of view. The reader doesn't know from this paragraph what 'my study' means
 - Define the general topic and thereby provide an appropriate context for the remainder of the review
 - Point out gaps in the existing literature that your research will fill
 - Describe how the lit review will be organized
- Review this module for more ideas on how to prepare an introduction to your own literature review.

Question 2

Write a 3-sentence statement when this is all that is known:

- There are 5 studies
- 3 describe online programs
- 1 study looks at outcomes; one is positive and one is negative
- No studies compare outcomes with in-class teaching

Test Yourself

Read through this summary webpage on literature and make sure you have answered or are able to answer all the questions posed:

[Structuring your assignment](#) / Queensland University of Technology Australia

[Writing a Literature Review](#) / RMIT University Australia

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