

Literature Review

Tips for Reviewing the Literature

What is a literature review?

A critical analysis or appraisal of the literature, or sources, relating to a particular research topic.

When you review the literature, you need to:

- Provide brief summaries of the sources;
- Make comparisons of the sources; and
- Present the strengths and weaknesses of the sources

Writing a literature review is a common form of assignment at university. It can be an assignment on its own OR a part of an assignment (e.g., case studies), or a thesis.

Why write a literature review?

- To gain a deep understanding of a topic.
- To discuss key theories, concepts and major works that relate to the topic.
- To identify key arguments made in the readings.
- To demonstrate that you are able to analyse, synthesise and critically evaluate sources.
- To highlight 'gaps' in the literature – i.e., areas that have not been sufficiently covered by scholars or researchers and/or what is not known on a particular topic.

What sources to include in a literature review?

Using appropriate sources is key to a successful literature review as they add value to your writing. The table below provides a list of criteria that you may use when selecting your source.

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Criteria	Questions to ask
Topicality	Is the source concerned with the topic of my research?
Comprehensiveness	How does the source contribute to the thorough treatment of the topic?
Breadth	Does the source provide information relevant to the general background of my research?
Relevance	Does the source present related information from other related fields that is valuable to my topic?
Currency	Is the source current and up to date?
Exclusion	Is the source within the explicit framework of my research?
Authority	Does the source include a landmark study? Was it written by a seminal theoretician or key expert in my field?
Availability	Is this source accessible?

How to structure a literature review?

If the literature review is an assignment on its own, a part of an assignment, or a chapter in a thesis, it should include an introduction, a body and a conclusion.

However, there are a few ways you can structure the body according to the topic and focus of the literature review. For example, some literature reviews present the information chronologically while others organise according to concepts, theories, themes or major works of authors.

Nevertheless, the information in your literature review should be organised in a logical manner. For example, the links between a research theme and the sources should be clearly explained as well as the relationships between sources.

As you write the review, you may consider the questions below that aim to cover a broad range of focus.

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Section	Questions to Consider
Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Why is the topic important? (a comprehensive overview – broad to specific)</i> • <i>What aspects of the topic will be discussed?</i> • <i>What criteria were used when selecting the literature? (e.g., date range)</i> • <i>What are the gaps in the literature?</i> • <i>How is the literature review going to be organised?</i>
Body	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>When did the topic gain interest? (historical background)</i> • <i>What are the theories/models in relation to previous studies? How have they been important? Do they have any limitations, and if so, should a new theory/model be used?</i> • <i>How have definitions of concepts on the topic evolved over time?</i> • <i>What was the methodology used in the studies? Was it appropriate?</i> • <i>What were the major findings in the studies reviewed? Any bias?</i> • <i>What were the major works that support a particular position and those against, and those that offer alternative approaches?</i> • <i>What are the strengths and weaknesses of the studies based on your evaluation?</i>
Conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What were the main agreements and disagreements in the literature? Leave out too specific details; provide clear and concise summaries.</i> • <i>What were the weaknesses in the findings OR limitations of the methodology? State them explicitly.</i> • <i>What were the gaps identified in the literature?</i> • <i>Any directions for future research on the topic?</i>

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 Efron, S. E., & Ravid, R. (2019). *Writing the Literature Review: A Practical Guide*. London: New York; Guildford Press.

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