

Literature Review

What is a review of the literature?

1. A literature review is an account of what has been published on a topic by accredited scholars and researchers.
2. In writing the literature review, your purpose is to convey to your reader what **knowledge and ideas have been established on a topic**, and what their strengths and weaknesses are.
3. As a piece of writing, the literature review must be **defined by a guiding concept** (e.g., your research objective, the problem or issue you are discussing, or your argumentative thesis).
4. It is not just a descriptive list of the material available, or a set of summaries.

What is a review of the literature?

1. Besides enlarging your knowledge about the topic, writing a literature review lets you gain and demonstrate skills in two areas:

information seeking: the ability to scan the literature efficiently, using manual or computerized methods, to identify a set of useful articles and books

critical appraisal: the ability to apply principles of analysis to identify unbiased and valid studies.

Why do you need to review the literature for your thesis or project?

1. to justify your choice of research question, theoretical or conceptual framework, and method;
2. to establish the importance of the topic;
3. to provide background information needed to understand the study;
4. to show readers you are familiar with significant and/or up-to-date research relevant to the topic;
5. to establish your study as one link in a chain of research that is developing knowledge in your field.

A review of the literature should

1. Set up a framework for your research;
2. show your reader that you:
 - have a clear understanding of the key concepts/ideas/studies/ models related to your topic;
 - know about the history of your research area and any related controversies;
 - can discuss these ideas in a context appropriate for your own investigation;
 - can evaluate the work of others;
 - clarify important definitions/terminology;
 - develop the research space you will also indicate in the Introduction and Abstract;
 - narrow the problem, and make the study feasible.

Good literature review

1. A literature review must do these things:
 - be organized around and related directly to the thesis or research question you are developing
 - synthesize results into a summary of what is and is not known
 - identify areas of controversy in the literature
 - formulate questions that need further research

Develop Literature Review

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)?
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., computer science, sociology, medicine)?

Develop Literature Review

Ask yourself questions like these:

1. How good was my **information seeking**? Has my search been wide enough to ensure I've found all the relevant material? Has it been narrow enough to exclude irrelevant material? Is the number of sources I've used appropriate for the length of my paper?
2. Have I **critically analysed** the literature I use? Instead of just listing and summarizing items, do I assess them, **discussing strengths and weaknesses**?
3. Have I cited and discussed studies contrary to my perspective?
4. 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 it 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)?

Planning and drafting your Literature Review

1. What has been done in your field of research? What principles of selection are you going to use?
2. How are you going to order your discussion? Chronological, thematic, conceptual, methodological, or a combination? What section headings will you use?
3. How do the various studies relate to each other? What precise contribution do they make to the field? What are their limitations?
4. How does your own research fit into what has already been done?

Things to note

1. The review must be shaped by a focus on key areas of interest, including research which provides a background to the topic.
2. It should also be selective. A common mistake in writing the review is to comment on everything you have read regardless of its relevance.
3. In your writing it is useful to think of the review as a funnel - start wide with the overview and then quickly narrow into discussing the research that relates to your specific topic.

Things to note

4. The review traditionally provides a historical overview of the theory and the research literature, with a special emphasis on the literature specific to the thesis topic.
5. It serves as well to support the argument/proposition behind your thesis, using evidence drawn from authorities or experts in your research field.

Literature Sources

1. journal articles
2. computerized databases
3. conferences proceedings
4. dissertations
5. empirical studies
6. government reports and reports from other bodies
7. historical records
8. textbooks