



# Literature Review

Prepared By University Of Waterloo

## Section A: Overview

This section will provide you with an overview of literature reviews and the components you should include while writing them.

### What Will I Learn?

By the end of this section, you will be able to

- ➔ understand the function of literature reviews in academic writing,
- ➔ recognize the differences and expectations for writing literature reviews across disciplines, and
- ➔ describe the structure of different literature review formats.

# Overview

## What Is a Literature Review?

A literature review is a comprehensive examination of what has been published on a specific topic. They are usually one of the first steps in research methodologies. Writing a literature review requires research, analysis, and synthesis.

### **Disciplinary Variation**

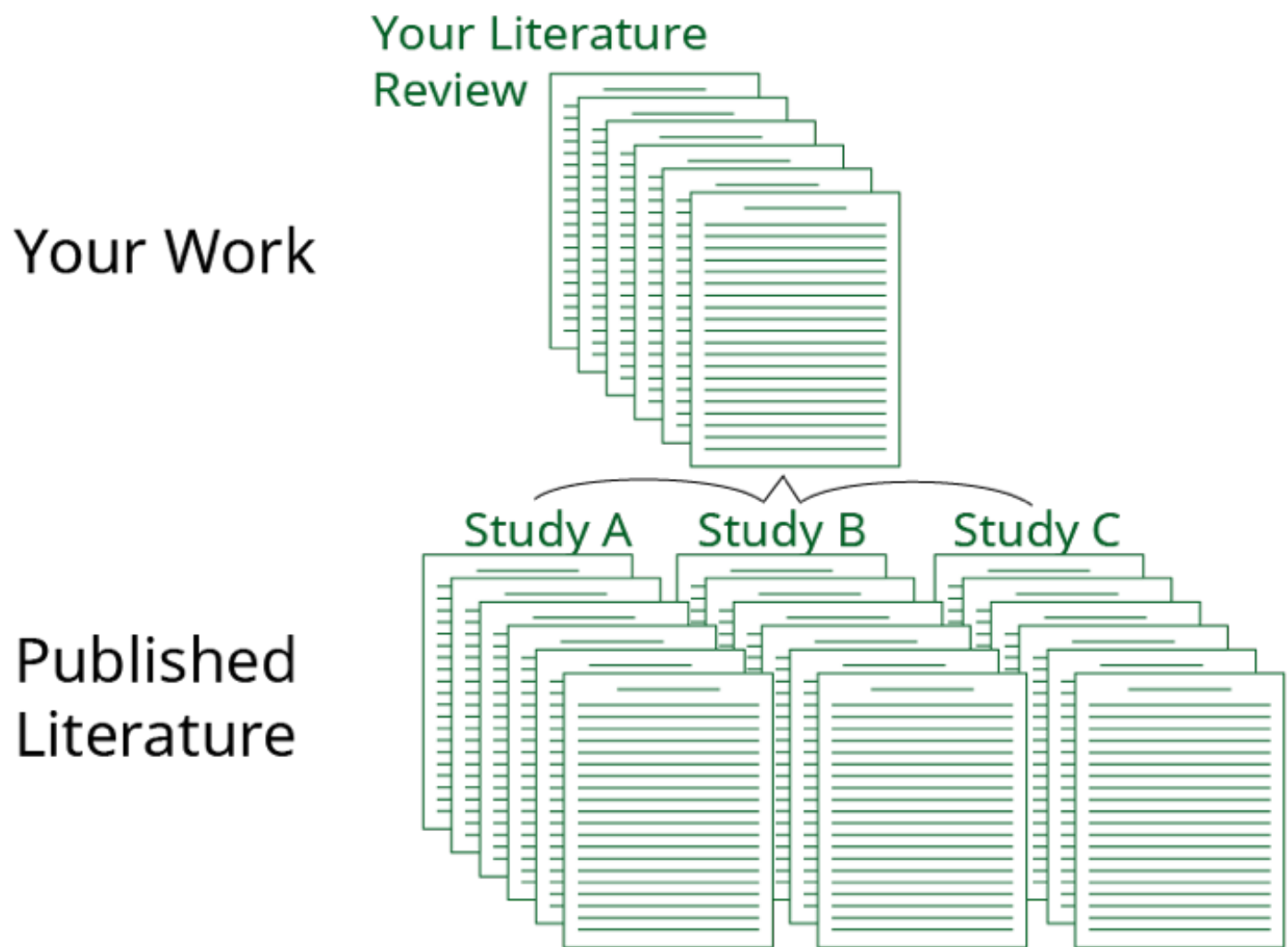
While every discipline uses literature reviews, there are key differences that arise out of the corresponding variations in research questions and methodologies. For example, kinesiologists studying heart disease will review the literature to identify acceptable measurement methods, whereas anthropologists researching intersections of culture and technology need to examine the literature to identify different categories of analysis. Because of differences in how we extract data from sources and what information is relevant, the analysis within and structure of our literature reviews will vary.

### **Format Variations**

Along with disciplinary differences, there are variations in format. Stand-alone literature reviews are the most common type of literature review and are frequently assigned by professors. They are self-contained pieces of writing that can function as a stepping stone to a larger piece of writing or can enhance writers' understandings of a topic. Embedded literature reviews, meanwhile, are part of a larger piece of writing, such as an essay, thesis, or scholarly article. They introduce readers to the surrounding literature while also situating your work within the larger scholarly discussion on that topic. Due to this variety of formats, make sure you are clear on what kind of literature review your professor is expecting.

## Why Do We Write Literature Reviews?

Researchers write literature reviews to identify trends, gaps, intersections, and directions within published research while also situating their own work (Figure A.1). Conducting a literature review will help you to clarify your understanding of the content and to establish a coherent picture of the current body of knowledge, which will streamline your writing process.



**Figure A.1: Your literature review**

Writing a literature review analyzes the wider scholarly conversation on your topic.

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### **You May Be Asked to Write a Literature Review for the Following Reasons:**

- 1 To demonstrate that you have conducted thorough research and, consequently, have developed an in-depth understanding of the material
- 2 To critically appraise other researchers' work, which provides you with better direction for your own research
- 3 To organize your thoughts on analyses of your research, resulting in a refined approach to your writing

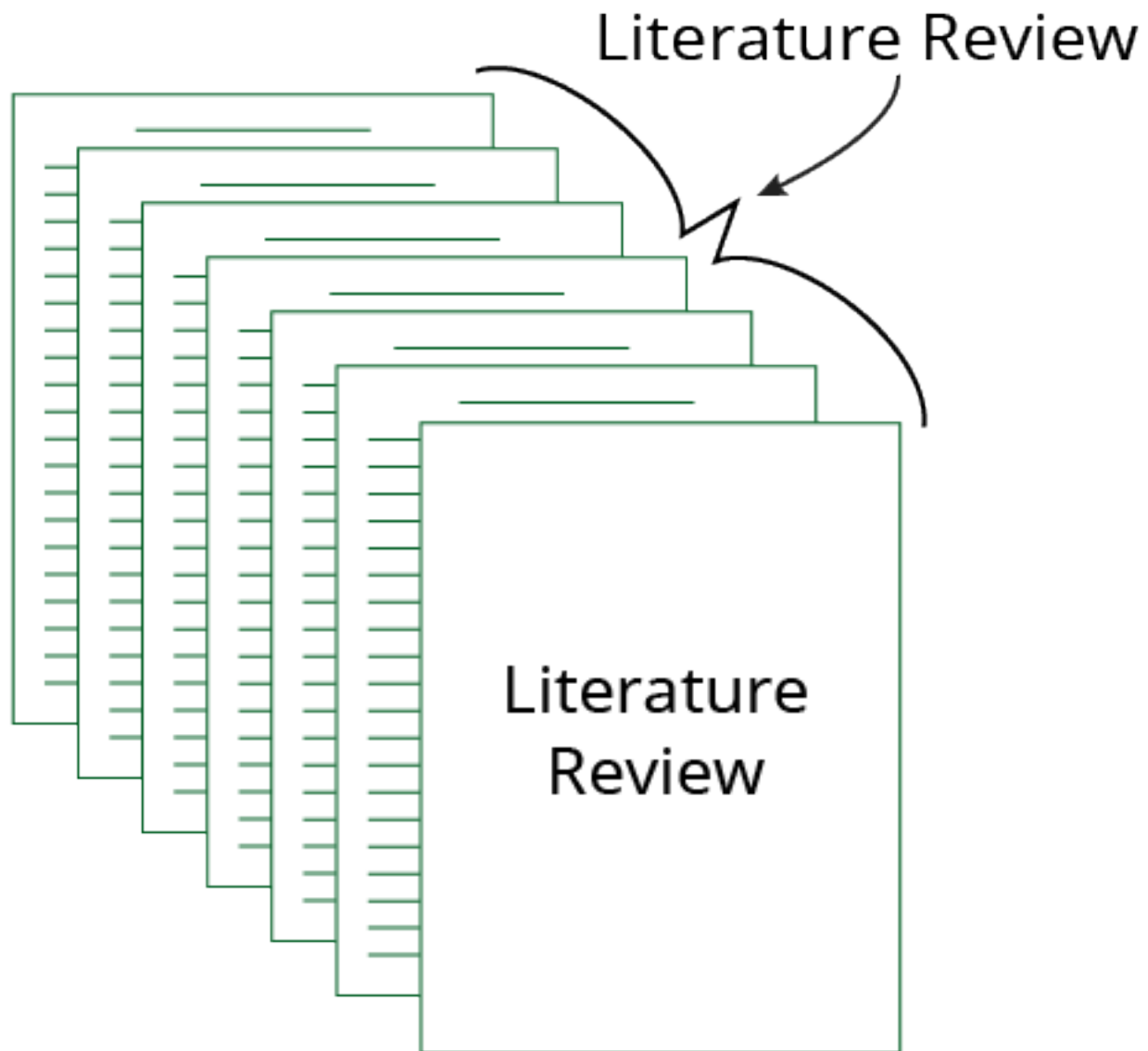
# Literature Review Formats

## Stand-Alone

Stand-alone literature reviews summarize and synthesize previously published studies on a specific topic to outline existing evidence, to identify gaps in current research, and to position future research. Unlike embedded literature reviews, which appear as part of a larger piece of work, stand-alone literature reviews are a self-contained piece of writing that can be read on their own (Figure A.2). Once researchers have selected a topic, the first step in their research methodology is often the stand-alone literature review.

Although you may write a stand-alone literature review as a course assignment to enhance your own knowledge as a student, scholars often write stand-alone literature reviews to benefit the research community and discipline. To write a strong stand-alone literature review, you should approach the research using a step-by-step process:

# Stand-alone



**Figure A.2: Stand-alone literature review**

Stand-alone literature reviews are independent documents that are entirely devoted to your review.

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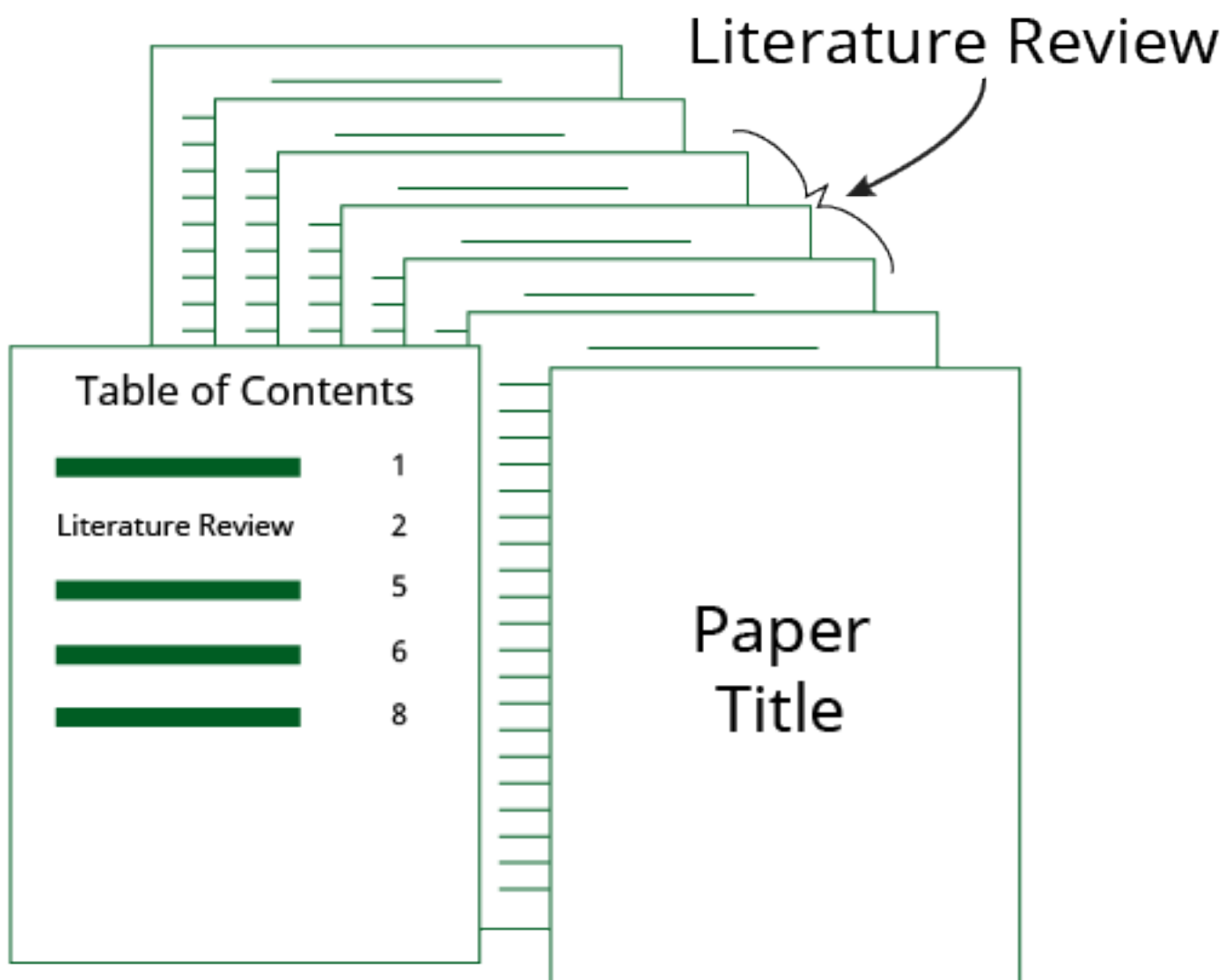
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## Embedded

Embedded literature reviews are sections within larger works, such as reports, essays, or dissertations, that discuss and analyze published material related to the research topic (Figure A.3). In these cases, even though the majority of your work will be devoted to your own research and discussion, a brief literature review will address how other scholars have discussed your topic. Writing an embedded literature review will clarify your understanding

of the material and demonstrate your thorough research skills. Embedded literature reviews are usually placed near the beginning of your essay in order to provide your reader with important context as well as to situate your work within the wider body of research on your topic. The length of embedded literature reviews varies, but is usually dependent upon the length of your assignment. Embedded literature reviews must discuss the connections between the sources you used for your research and also make connections between your work and these sources. To write a strong embedded literature review, you should approach your research systematically.

# Embedded



**Figure A.3: Embedded literature review**

Embedded literature reviews are sections of larger works.

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## Pre-Writing

- 1 **Planning:** Using your assignment criteria as a guideline, construct a research question to direct your research and reading strategies. From here, identify the purpose or thesis for your topic.
  - 2 **Researching & Reading:** Search appropriate databases. Carefully select sources that will provide current and credible information on your topic. In your notes, be sure to record each author's thesis, methodology, strengths, limitations, and significant findings in addition to relevant information you can use in an essay.
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## Drafting/Writing

- 3 **Analyzing:** Critically review each source's methods, procedures, data validity/reliability, and other themes of interest. Consider how each source approaches your topic in addition to their collective points of intersection and separation. Identify any gaps within their research. Try to place your current work and research within this wider discussion by considering how your research supports, contradicts, or departs from other scholars' research.
  - 4 **Summarizing:** Summarize findings across studies and make conclusions based on the collective evidence.
  - 5 **Discussing:** In your essay, briefly explain the current state of research about your topic. Use specific authors or sources as examples, and be sure to explain any similarities or departures in approach, methodology, findings, or argument. Then, explain where your work fits within this discussion and why.
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## Revising

- 6 **Revising:** Revise and finalize the structure, style, and

grammar, etc.

## Organization

For both embedded and stand-alone literature reviews, you will need to select the most effective way to organize your material. Three common approaches are chronological, thematic, and debate-focused.

### Chronological

### Thematic

### Debate

#### Chronological

You can notice a change over time in how sources address or treat the topic. For example, scholars who published in the 1960s interpreted a historical event differently than those who published in the early 2000s.

Next →

Closely related to the organization of your material is the structure of your paragraphs. The structure will help you to clearly express your ideas and demonstrate how your sources are connected. Careful planning will also help you to provide insightful analysis.



# Standard Literature Review

The standard literature review for this module is a stand-alone literature review, which can be broken into four sections: an introduction, body paragraphs, a conclusion, and a reference list.

Click each button to learn about the purpose of each section.



**Note:** Always be clear on the expectations your professor has by reading the assignment guidelines and course syllabus. Also, be sure to adhere to your style guidelines because headings, title pages, references lists, and other sections or formatting features may differ.

## Literature Review Sample Paper

This sample of a **Literature Review** should serve as a useful guide to help you get started.



### Download PDF

Download the [Literature Review Sample Paper](#).

# Historiography and Systematic Literature Reviews

## Historiography

**Historiography** begins with the understanding that the same historical events, people, and places can be examined in different ways, which will produce different interpretations of historical topics. Rather than examining the topic itself, historiography is the study of how historical topics have been examined over time by other historians.

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### “ Historiography

A historiography is a type of literature review that is specific to history, as a discipline. ”

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They have two goals:

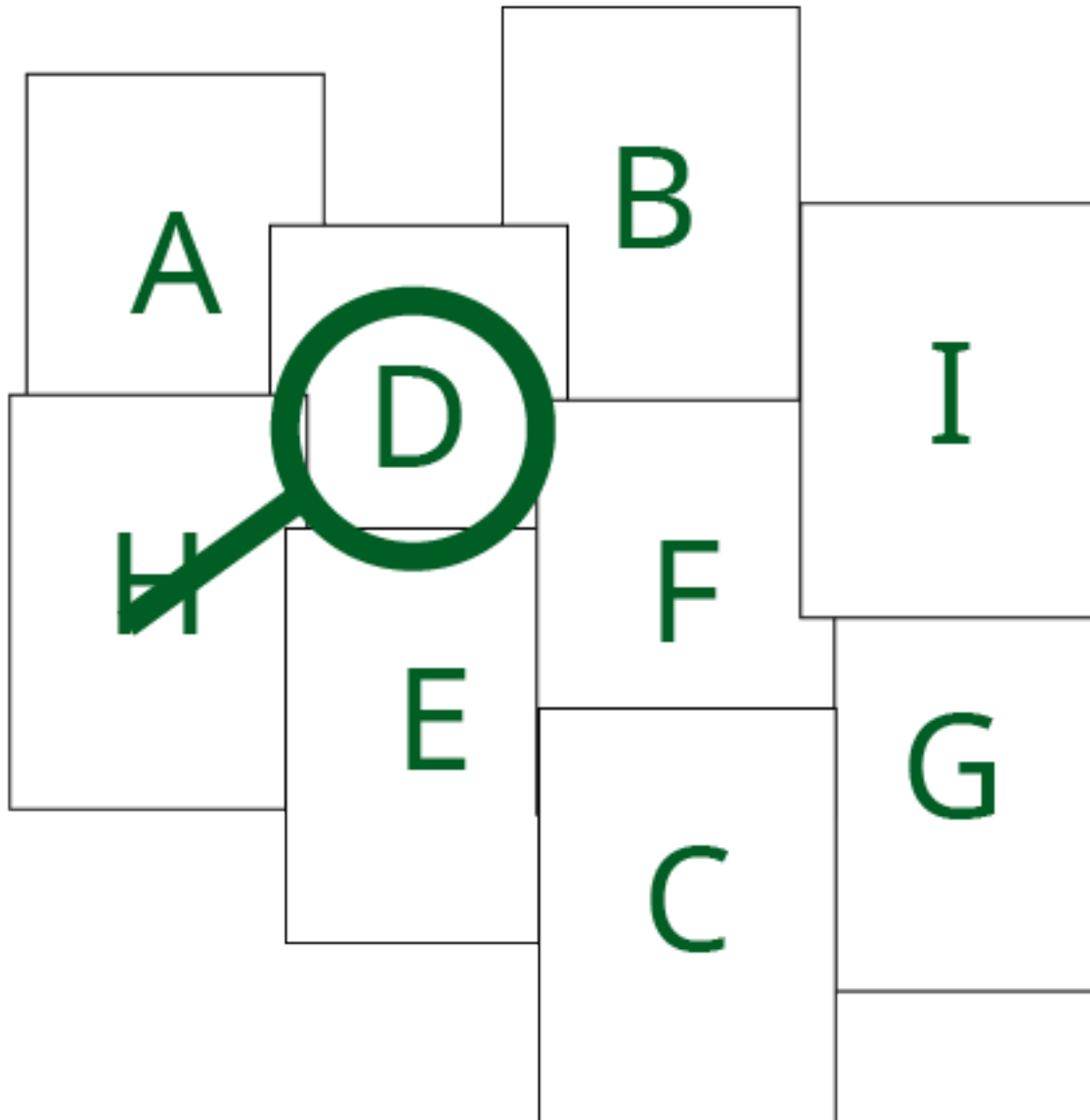
- 1 to discuss the major contributors to a topic and
- 2 to examine their major arguments.

By extension, your historiography should also explain the major authors' perspectives (i.e., feminist, Marxist, postmodern) in addition to the type of history they produced (i.e., cultural, political, social).

The connections and discussions between these authors should be central within your historiography, as you need to note points of intersection and divergence within the current discourse on your topic. Like other literature reviews, historiographies can be embedded or stand-alone. As such, the thesis or central argument of your historiography should explain why your research on the topic contributes to or rejects previous historical analyses of your topic. Because most historical writing uses the Chicago Manual of Style as a reference system, most historiographies will also require you to use the Chicago Manual of Style.

In order to write an effective historiography, use the following steps (Figure A.4.i to Figure A.4.vi):

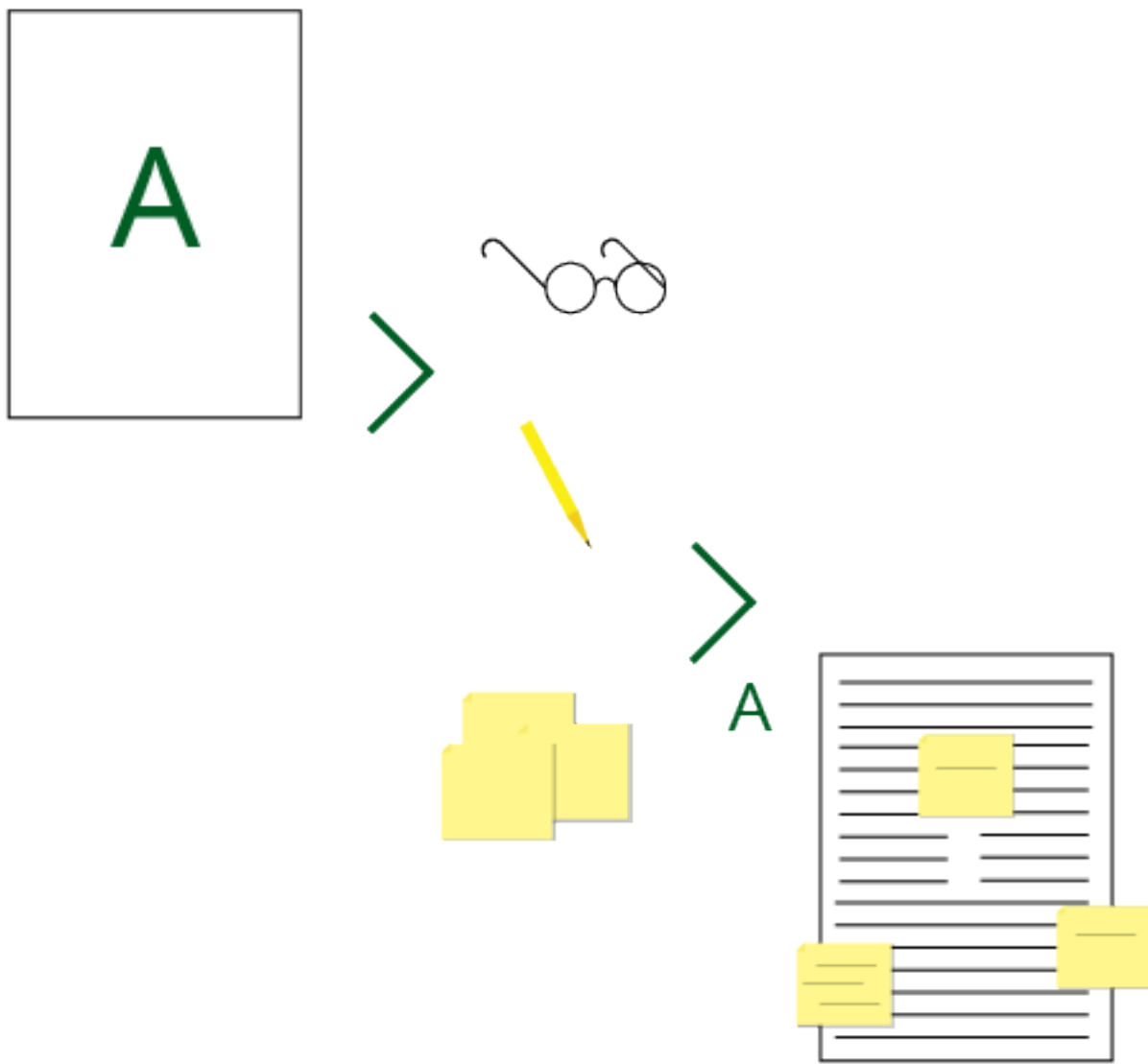
- 1 **Learn** the history of your topic. You must have a clear understanding of the important people, series of events, places, or times that were involved with your topic.



**Figure A.4.i**

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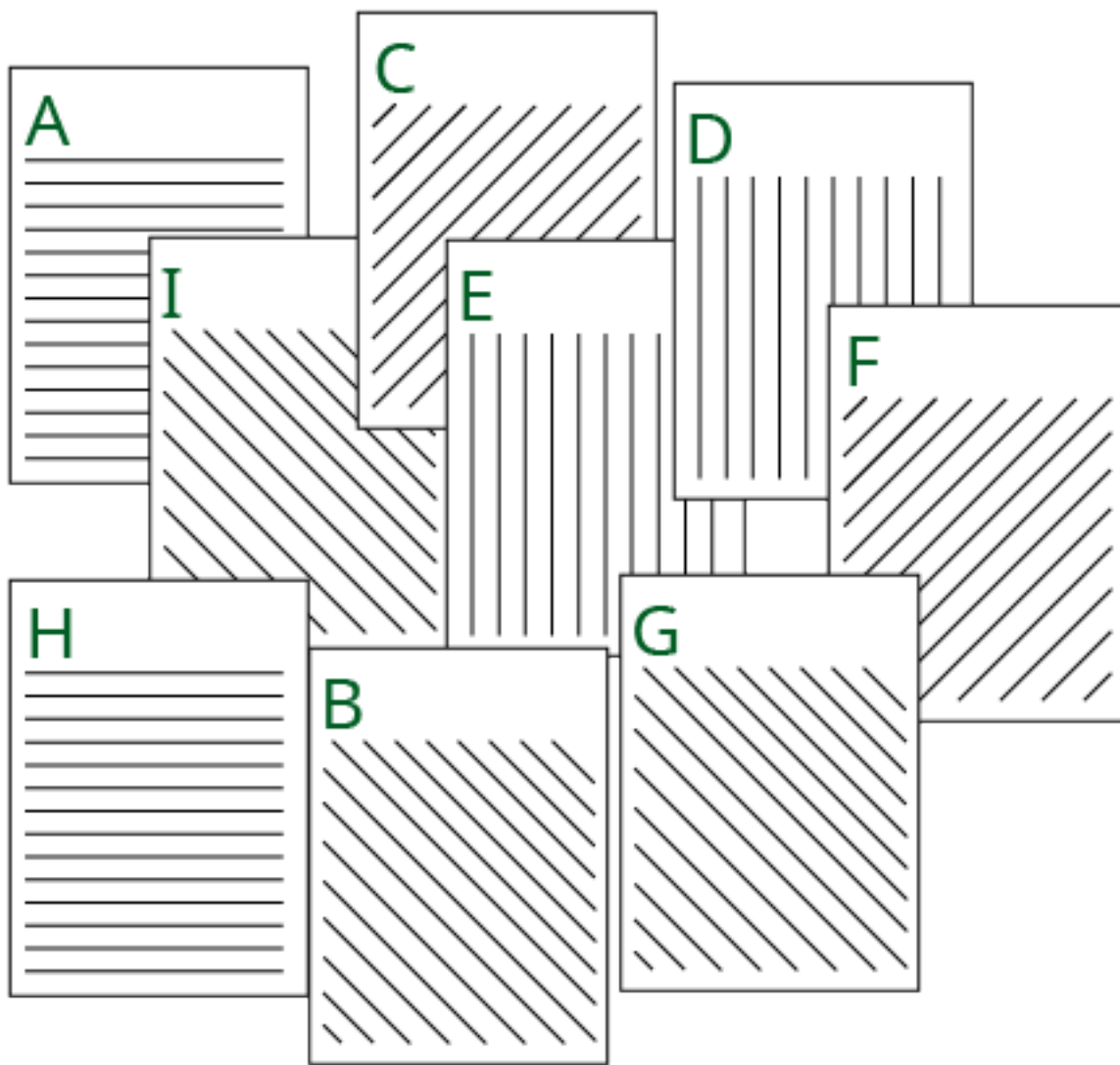
- 2 **Take careful notes** while researching your topic. Include information on the thesis, perspective, historical approach, arguments, sources, and methodology. Also note when your sources were published and if any important social, political, or economic events occurred at roughly the same time.



**Figure A.4.ii**

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- 3 **Compare** the sources' approaches to your topic. Look for patterns in authors' approaches or in their methodological handling of the topic. Also look for publication patterns by investigating if certain approaches to the topic were common during a specific time. Try to explain points of similarity or difference by considering the authors' individual historical perspectives, source usage, methodology, or structure. Changes in approach over time can be seen after publication information has been compared, so be sure to place the authors within their own historical context too.

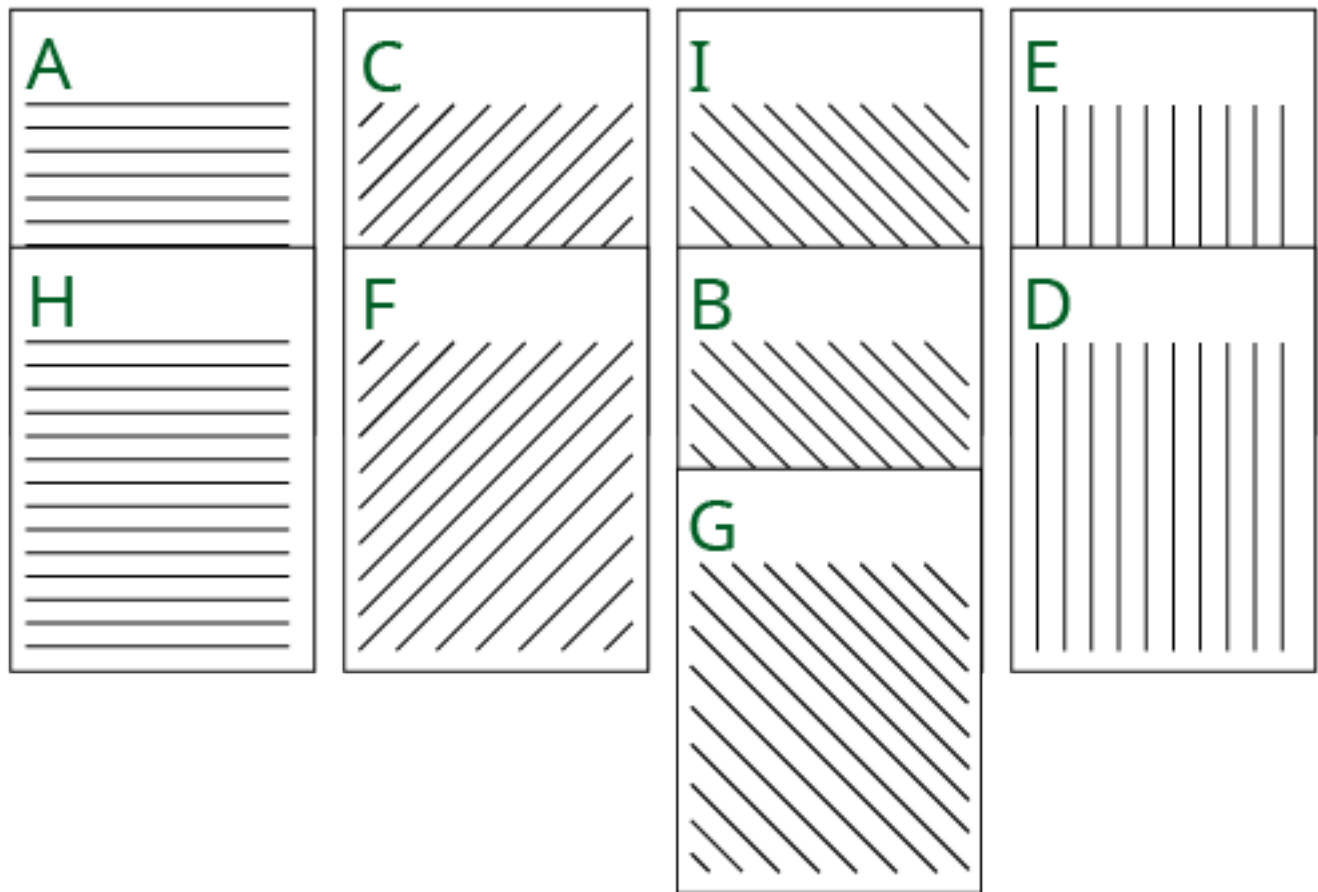


**Figure A.4.iii**

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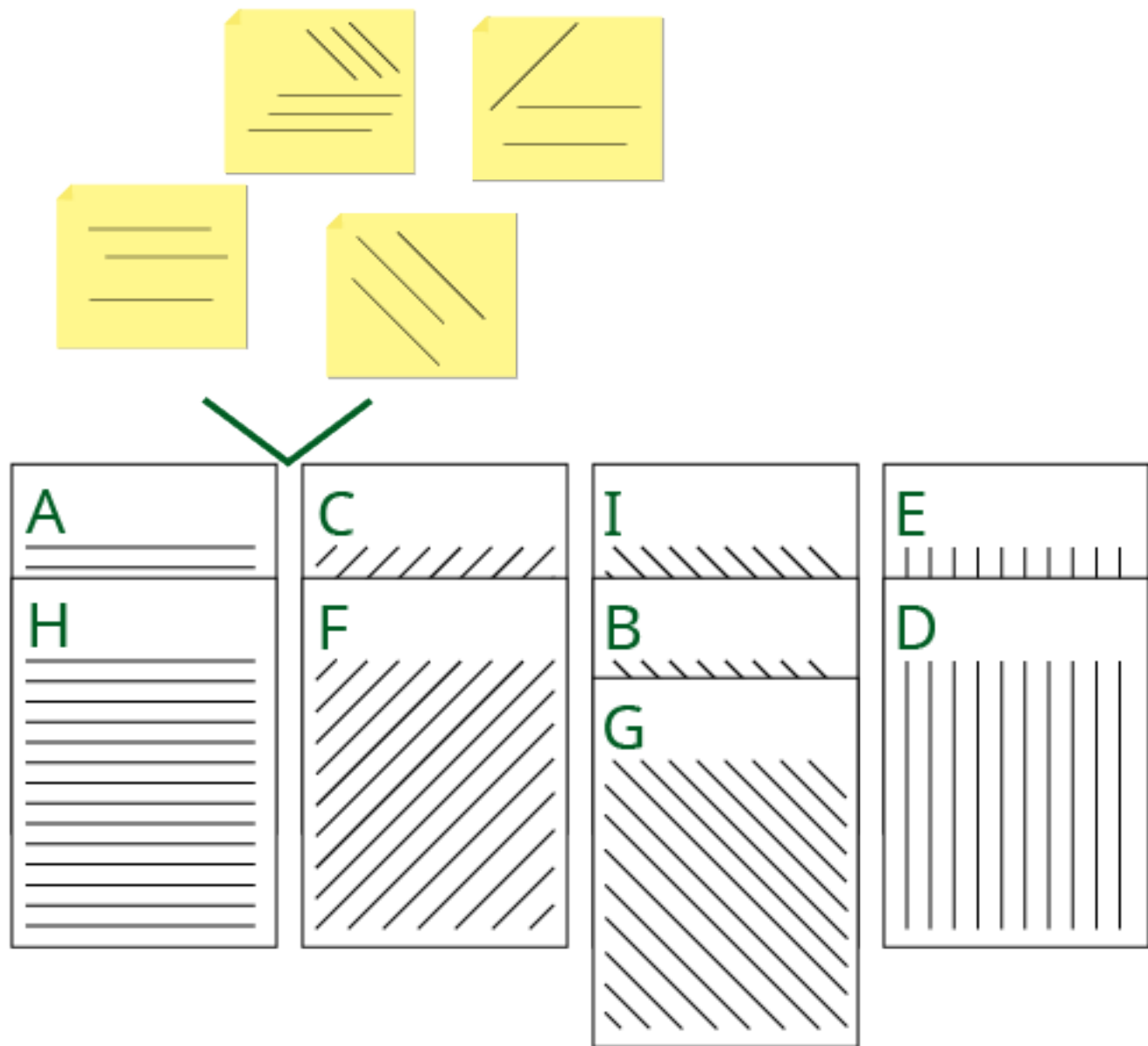
**Analyze** your comparisons by considering what the differences and similarities between sources on the topic tell you about how it has been studied. Explain why this has been the case and how these approaches enhance or limit current understandings of the topic. This will serve as the basis for your thesis statement.



**Figure A.4.iv**

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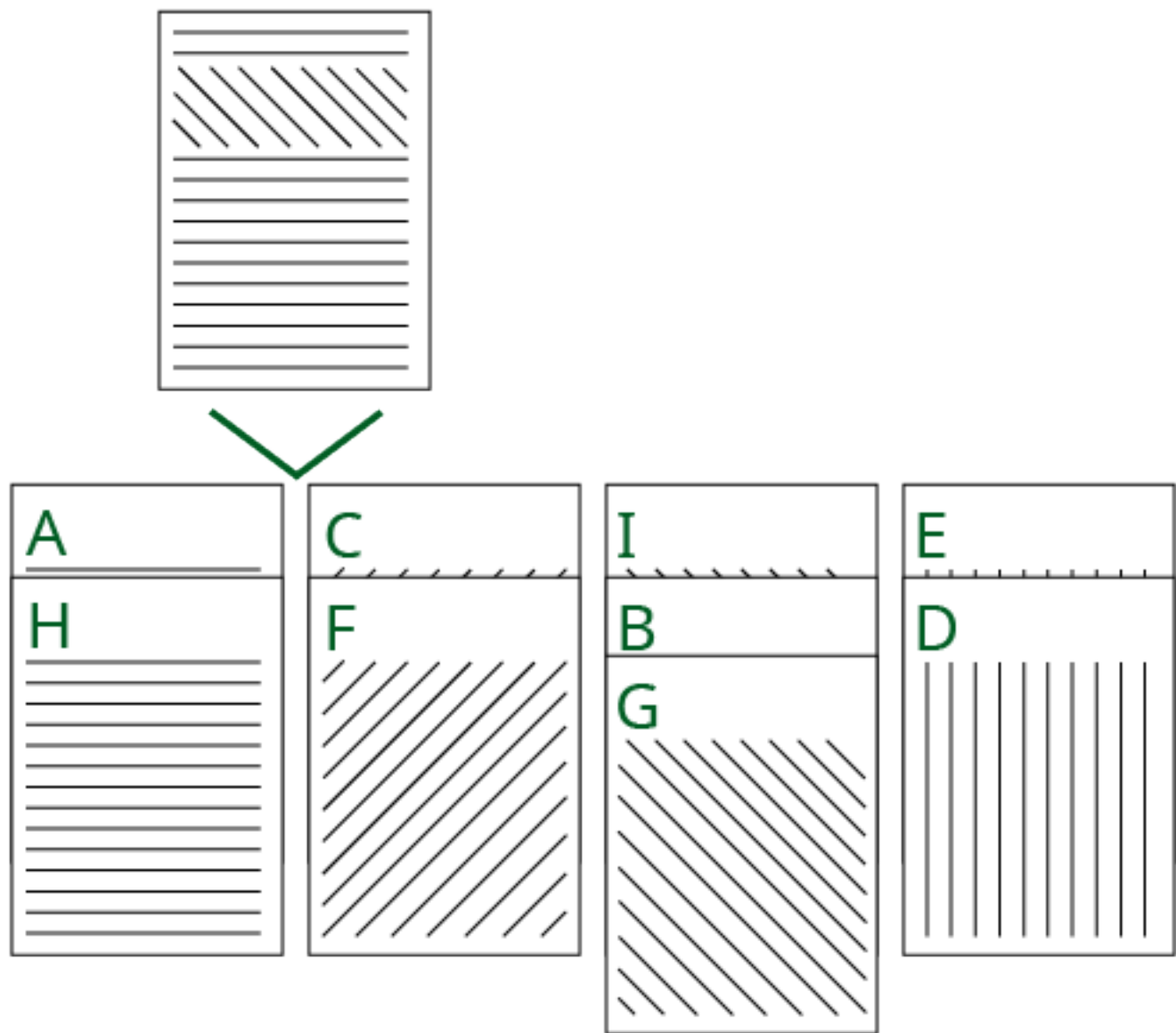
- 5 Place** your own work within this conversation by explaining where your research fits. Address how your approach to the topic reinforces or rejects previous approaches as well as how your work contributes to the larger body of knowledge on your topic.



**Figure A.4.v**

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- 6 **Write** your historiography. For stand-alone historiographies, include an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion. Be sure to include some background information on the actual topic in the introduction. Embedded historiographies are shorter and may only need to be two or three paragraphs. In this case, devote most of your space to explaining the connections between sources, but you must also include a thesis and a conclusion, even though they will be brief. In both stand-alone and embedded historiographies, you must support your arguments and analyses with examples from the sources.



**Figure A.4.vi**

**Figure A.4: Preparing to write a historiography**

This series displays the six steps needed to prepare for writing a historiography. First, carefully examine your topic to gain necessary background information. Second, take detailed notes while researching. Third, identify patterns in approaches to your topic. Fourth, analyze the patterns you noted by considering similarities and differences between sources. Fifth, situate your own research within the current literature in your field. Sixth, write your historiography.

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## Systematic Literature Reviews



Systematic Literature Reviews (SLRs) or Systematic Reviews (SRs) are one type of stand-alone literature review that originated from the clinical fields. SLRs are a research method used to write an entire journal article. SLRs differ from stand-alone literature reviews because they follow a rigorous review protocol that is objective and comprehensive so other researchers may replicate the work. SLRs may be quantitative (by only reviewing quantitative studies), qualitative (by only reviewing qualitative studies), or mixed methods (by reviewing both quantitative and qualitative studies). Their objective is to synthesize evidence through meta-analysis, a type of SLR that employs statistical analyses.

While many approaches exist for conducting SLRs, there is a common process:

- 1 **Purpose:** Identify the purpose of your literature review. You may start with writing research questions and objectives.
- 2 **Search strategy:** Create a search strategy to limit the scope of your review. You may start by defining inclusion parameters (e.g., qualitative vs. quantitative studies, date published, location of study, etc.). You should also record keywords to search for your topic and build search strings that will help you find sources (e.g., exercise AND mental health AND adolescents). Be sure to meet with a reference librarian if you are unsure how to create an effective search strategy.
- 3 **Search:** Conduct a search in databases relevant to your topic (e.g., PubMed for Applied Health Sciences or Scopus for interdisciplinary work). Use the search strings created in Step 2 to search the databases. Consult your library subject guide to review databases appropriate for your topic.
- 4 **Extraction:** Once you have selected the sources for your literature review from Step 3, you may start reading them to extract information. Before you start, you may want to brainstorm some common themes that you will use to analyze the sources (e.g., participant characteristics, measurement tools, results). These themes will also be used as the headings for your Matrix, which will be discussed in detail in [Section B: Planning and Researching](#)
- 5 **Critical appraisal:** Evaluate the quality of the studies and identify gaps or weaknesses (e.g., small sample size). You may want to add these new headings to your Matrix to remind you to critically appraise the sources according to this new criteria.
- 6 **Synthesis:** Analyze the sources in your Matrix by identifying commonalities, examining divergences, and combining the facts you extracted from the sources. Interpret your findings for readers.

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**Writing:** Write the stand-alone literature review using an introduction, body, and conclusion. You will also describe your search strategy, inclusion criteria, and overall methodology so that your review is reputable and replicable.

## Systematic Process for Conducting Literature Reviews

Use this helpful chart to plan your **Systematic Literature Reviews**.



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Download the [Completed Project Schedule](#) worksheet.

Adapted from Okoli, C. (2015). A guide to conducting a stand-alone systematic literature review. *Communications of the Association of Information Systems*, 37(43), 879-910. Retrieved from <http://aisel.aisnet.org/cais/vol37/iss1/43>.

# Key Takeaways and References

## Key Takeaways

- ➔ Literature reviews vary by discipline and function, so it is important to select an appropriate format.
  - ➔ Literature reviews allow you to gain an advanced understanding of material while also contributing to the scholarly conversation surrounding your topic.
  - ➔ Literature reviews contain an introduction, body paragraphs, a conclusion, and a reference list regardless of format.
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# Next Section Overview

In Section B: Planning and Researching, we will explore the preliminary steps required to write an effective and critical literature review.

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