

Reviewing Literature

A literature review is a survey of scholarly sources on a specific topic. It provides an overview of current knowledge, allowing you to identify relevant theories, methods, and gaps in the existing research.

Writing a literature review involves finding relevant publications (such as books and journal articles), critically analyzing them, and explaining what you found. There are five key steps:

1. **Search** for relevant literature
2. **Evaluate** sources
3. **Identify** themes, debates and gaps
4. **Outline** the structure
5. **Write** your literature review

A good literature review doesn't just summarize sources—it analyzes, synthesizes, and critically evaluates to give a clear picture of the state of knowledge on the subject.

Why write a literature review?

When you write a thesis, dissertation, or research paper, you will have to conduct a literature review to situate your research within existing knowledge. The literature review gives you a chance to:

- Demonstrate your familiarity with the topic and scholarly context
- Develop a theoretical framework and methodology for your research
- Position yourself in relation to other researchers and theorists
- Show how your research addresses a gap or contributes to a debate

You might also have to write a literature review as a stand-alone assignment. In this case, the purpose is to evaluate the current state of research and demonstrate your knowledge of scholarly debates around a topic.

The content will look slightly different in each case, but the process of conducting a literature review follows the same steps.

Writing literature reviews is a particularly important skill if you want to apply for graduate school or pursue a career in research.

Step 1: Search for relevant literature

Before you begin searching for literature, you need a clearly defined topic. If you are writing the literature review section of a dissertation or research paper, you will search for literature related to your research problem and questions.

If you are writing a literature review as a stand-alone assignment, you will have to choose a focus and develop a central question to direct your search. Unlike a dissertation research

question, this question has to be answerable without collecting original data. You should be able to answer it based only on a review of existing publications.

Research question example: What is the impact of social media on body image among Generation Z?

Make a list of keywords

Start by creating a list of keywords related to your research question. Include each of the key concepts or variables you're interested in, and list any synonyms and related terms. You can add to this list if you discover new keywords in the process of your literature search.

Keywords example

- Social media, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, TikTok
- Body image, self-perception, self-esteem, mental health
- Generation Z, teenagers, adolescents, youth

Search for relevant sources

Use your keywords to begin searching for sources. Some useful databases to search for journals and articles include:

- Your university's library catalogue
- Google Scholar
- JSTOR
- EBSCO
- Project Muse (humanities and social sciences)
- Medline (life sciences and biomedicine)
- EconLit (economics)
- Inspec (physics, engineering and computer science)

You can use boolean operators to help narrow down your search:

- **AND** to find sources that contain more than one keyword (e.g. social media AND body image AND generation Z)
- **OR** to find sources that contain one of a range of synonyms (e.g. generation Z OR teenagers OR adolescents)
- **NOT** to exclude results containing certain terms (e.g. apple NOT fruit)

Read the abstract to find out whether an article is relevant to your question. When you find a useful book or article, you can check the bibliography to find other relevant sources.

To identify the most important publications on your topic, take note of recurring citations. If the same authors, books or articles keep appearing in your reading, make sure to seek them out.

Step 2: Evaluate and select sources

You probably won't be able to read absolutely everything that has been written on the topic—you'll have to evaluate which sources are most relevant to your questions.

For each publication, ask yourself:

- What question or problem is the author addressing?
- What are the key concepts and how are they defined?
- What are the key theories, models and methods? Does the research use established frameworks or take an innovative approach?
- What are the results and conclusions of the study?
- How does the publication relate to other literature in the field? Does it confirm, add to, or challenge established knowledge?
- How does the publication contribute to your understanding of the topic? What are its key insights and arguments?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the research?

Make sure the sources you use are credible, and make sure you read any landmark studies and major theories in your field of research.

You can find out how many times an article has been cited on Google Scholar—a high citation count means the article has been influential in the field, and should certainly be included in your literature review. The scope of your review will depend on your topic and discipline: in the sciences you usually only review recent literature, but in the humanities, you might take a long historical perspective (for example, to trace how a concept has changed in meaning over time).

Take notes and cite your sources

As you read, you should also begin the writing process. Take notes that you can later incorporate into the text of your literature review. It is important to keep track of your sources with citations to avoid plagiarism. It can be helpful to make an annotated bibliography, where you compile full citation information and write a paragraph of summary and analysis for each source. This helps you remember what you read and saves time later in the process.

Step 3: Identify themes, debates, and gaps

To begin organizing your literature review's argument and structure, you need to understand the connections and relationships between the sources you've read. Based on your reading and notes, you can look for:

- **Trends and patterns (in theory, method or results):** do certain approaches become more or less popular over time?
- **Themes:** what questions or concepts recur across the literature?
- **Debates, conflicts and contradictions:** where do sources disagree?
- **Pivotal publications:** are there any influential theories or studies that changed the direction of the field?

- **Gaps:** what is missing from the literature? Are there weaknesses that need to be addressed?

This step will help you work out the structure of your literature review and (if applicable) show how your own research will contribute to existing knowledge.

Step 4: Outline your literature review's structure

There are various approaches to organizing the body of a literature review. You should have a rough idea of your strategy before you start writing. Depending on the length of your literature review, you can combine several of these strategies (for example, your overall structure might be thematic, but each theme is discussed chronologically).

Chronological

The simplest approach is to trace the development of the topic over time. However, if you choose this strategy, be careful to avoid simply listing and summarizing sources in order. Try to analyze patterns, turning points and key debates that have shaped the direction of the field. Give your interpretation of how and why certain developments occurred.

Thematic

If you have found some recurring central themes, you can organize your literature review into subsections that address different aspects of the topic.

Methodological

If you draw your sources from different disciplines or fields that use a variety of research methods, you might want to compare the results and conclusions that emerge from different approaches. For example:

- Look at what results have emerged in qualitative versus quantitative research
- Discuss how the topic has been approached by empirical versus theoretical scholarship
- Divide the literature into sociological, historical, and cultural sources

Theoretical

A literature review is often the foundation for a theoretical framework. You can use it to discuss various theories, models, and definitions of key concepts. You might argue for the relevance of a specific theoretical approach, or combine various theoretical concepts to create a framework for your research.

Step 5: Write your literature review

Like any other academic text, your literature review should have an introduction, a main body, and a conclusion. What you include in each depends on the objective of your literature review.

Introduction

The introduction should clearly establish the focus and purpose of the literature review.

Dissertation literature review: If you are writing the literature review as part of your dissertation or thesis, reiterate your central problem or research question and give a brief

summary of the scholarly context. You can emphasize the timeliness of the topic (“many recent studies have focused on the problem of x”) or highlight a gap in the literature (“while there has been much research on x, few researchers have taken y into consideration”).

Stand-alone literature review: If you are writing a stand-alone paper, give some background on the topic and its importance, discuss the scope of the literature you will review, and state your objective. What new insight will you draw from the literature?

Body

Depending on the length of your literature review, you might want to divide the body into subsections. You can use a subheading for each theme, time period, or methodological approach.

As you write, you can follow these tips:

- **Summarize and synthesize:** give an overview of the main points of each source and combine them into a coherent whole
- **Analyze and interpret:** don’t just paraphrase other researchers—add your own interpretations where possible, discussing the significance of findings in relation to the literature as a whole
- **Critically evaluate:** mention the strengths and weaknesses of your sources
- **Write in well-structured paragraphs:** use transition words and topic sentences to draw connections, comparisons and contrasts

Conclusion

In the conclusion, you should summarize the key findings you have taken from the literature and emphasize their significance.

Dissertation literature review

If the literature review is part of your thesis or dissertation, show how your research addresses gaps and contributes new knowledge, or discuss how you have drawn on existing theories and methods to build a framework for your research.

Stand-alone literature review

If you are writing a stand-alone paper, you can discuss the overall implications of the literature or make suggestions for future research based on the gaps you have identified.