

Literature review

Academic Tip Sheet



This academic tip sheet:

- explains what is meant by a literature review;
- identifies 'the literature';
- describes some of the conventions to follow when doing a literature review; and
- looks at the process of developing a literature review.

What is a literature review?

A literature review may be presented as a paper on its own, or it can be contained as an integral part of an article, research proposal, research report or dissertation.

It describes, compares, contrasts and evaluates the major theories, arguments, themes, methodologies, approaches and controversies in the scholarly literature on a subject. It also connects, compares and contrasts these arguments, themes and methodologies etc., with the concerns of a proposed piece of research (that is, the

aims of the essay, research project or thesis, the research questions, and the central hypothesis). The literature review is:

- **not** an annotated bibliography
- **not** a summary of each of your sources listed one by one
- **not** just a descriptive summary of the historical background to your topic

In a literature review, your central focus is examining and evaluating what has been said before on a topic, and establishing the relevance of this information to your own research. You may also identify what has not

been said in the literature on a subject (this is called 'a gap in the literature', and filling such gaps with new knowledge is a particular interest of postgraduate scholarship). You may also need to discuss the methodologies that have been used in the literature and how these relate to your chosen method.

What is 'the literature'?

The literature broadly refers to information relevant to your topic of interest. Such works may deal specifically or more generally with your topic of interest. While such information may be obtained from a variety of sources, including books, journal articles, reports, etc., the focus is on scholarly published materials. As source material it can be categorised as a:

Primary source: Original research from journals, articles or conferences, original materials such as historical documents, or creative works such as art or literature.

Secondary source: Evaluations, reviews or syntheses of original work

Tertiary source: Broadly scoped material put together usually from secondary sources to provide an overview, e.g. a textbook.

Selecting appropriate source material

To limit the scope of your work, you will need to decide what literature to select for your review. In general, the source material is appropriate if it has:

- **relevance** – it should contribute to the development of your topic, clarify your position, provide an alternative point of view you wish to argue against or provide useful primary source material.
- **authority** – it should be published in a reputable journal, have been critically evaluated, been used extensively as a source material, been peer reviewed or be a recognised authority in the area.
- **currency** – it should be recent research or still be influential in the area.

The generic conventions of literature reviews

Keep your primary focus on the literature. When writing be sure that you:

- evaluate the literature rather than just summarising it;
- compare/contrast sources to each other rather than writing discrete sections; and
- connect the literature to your research.

If you are completing a literature review for a research project you may also need to:

- include some theoretical discussion about your chosen methodology; and
- argue why your research is necessary.

The 5 C's of writing a literature review:

Since a literature review is information dense, it is crucial that the work is intelligently structured to enable a reader to grasp the key arguments with ease.

1. **Cite:** keep the primary focus on the literature.
2. **Compare** the various arguments, theories, methodologies, approaches and findings expressed in the literature: what do the authors agree on? Who employs similar approaches?
3. **Contrast** the various arguments, themes, methodologies, approaches and controversies expressed in the literature: what are the major areas of disagreement, controversy, debate?
4. **Critique** the literature: which arguments are more persuasive, and why? Which approaches, findings, methodologies seem most reliable, valid, or appropriate, and why? Pay attention to the verbs you use to describe what it is an author says/does: e.g. asserts, demonstrates, etc.
5. **Connect** the literature to your own area of research and investigation: how does your own work draw on/depart from/synthesise what has been said in the literature?

Writing the literature review

Writing a literature review can be a lengthy endeavour – be sure to give yourself plenty of time. Bear in mind that your reading and writing will feed into each other. You should:

- Identify research questions/areas/issues/themes of investigation – what are you searching the literature to discover?
- Preview sample literature reviews in the same field.
- Obtain relevant sources.
- Keep bibliographical records of all sources referred to.
- Critically read each source (read for the arguments presented rather than for 'facts'). Make notes on the key questions/areas/issues/themes identified earlier.
- Evaluate the logic/cogency of each source, and its relevance to your own work.
- Organise material under subheadings according to various categories, chronology or similarities/differences in arguments or theories/findings.
- Write a mini-introduction, a series of paragraphs and a mini-conclusion for each of these categories.
- Write the introduction and conclusion to the literature review last.
- Draft and redraft.

The literature review structure

Like a standard academic essay, a literature review is made up of three key components: an introduction, a body and a conclusion. Most literature reviews can follow the following format.

- **Introduction:** Introduce the topic/problem and the context within which it is found.
- **Body:** Examine past research in the area highlighting methodological and/or theoretical developments, areas of agreement, contentious areas, important studies and so forth. Keep the focus on your area of interest and identify gaps in the research that your research/investigation will attempt to fill. State clearly how your work builds on or responds to earlier work.
- **Conclusion:** Summarise what has emerged from the review of literature and reiterate conclusions.

Literature review checklist

- **Did you outline the scope and purpose of the review?**
- **Have you identified appropriate source material mainly from primary and secondary sources?**
- **Did you keep bibliographical records of all the researched material?**
- **Is each source critically reviewed?**
- **Have you organised all the material you obtained from the sources?**
- **Have you developed your approach?**
- **Have you written a draft and edited it carefully?**
- **Is your literature review submitted on time and in the correct format?**

References

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