Composing a Literature Review

The purpose of a literature review is to locate your own research within the context of existing literature on a topic.

When beginning a literature review:

1. Do enough research to understand the full context for your specific topic. What is the scholarly conversation around your research questions? Is there a consensus in the academic community or are there contradictory accounts regarding your research?
2. Organize your research to pull out the overall trends in what has been published about your topic. Are there any conflicts in the theories for understanding your topic? Methodology? Evidence? Conclusions?
3. Establish your own reasons for reviewing the literature, and identify any gaps that exist in the scholarly literature. How does your research question fit within the literature?

As you’re researching, you should critically evaluate each work to consider:

Author’s credentials and evidence -- what are the author’s credentials? Are the author’s arguments supported by evidence [e.g. primary historical material, case studies, narratives, statistics, recent scientific findings, etc.]?

Methodology -- were the techniques used to identify, gather, and analyze the data appropriate to addressing the research problem? Was the sample size appropriate? Were the results effectively interpreted and reported?

Objectivity -- is the author’s perspective even-handed or prejudicial? Is contrary data considered or is certain pertinent information ignored to prove the author’s point?

Value -- are the author’s arguments and conclusions convincing? Does the work ultimately contribute in any significant way to an understanding of the subject?

When writing a literature review, you should include the following:

- An overview of the subject, issue, or theory under consideration [definitions, key sources on a topic]
- Division of sources into themes or categories [e.g. works that support a particular position, those against, and those offering alternative approaches entirely],
- An explanation of how each work is similar to and/or how it varies from the others,
- And what are the gaps in the literature? Where does your research fit in?

Even though the literature review exists to present the ideas of other writers, remember to write about the sources in your own words. For example, weave references to other sources into what you are writing but maintain your own voice by starting and ending the paragraph with your own ideas and wording.

Remember to summarize and synthesize your sources within each thematic paragraph as well as throughout the review. Include the important features of a source, then synthesize it by rephrasing the study’s significance and relating it to your work.

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Michelle Guittar, Social Sciences Librarian
When paraphrasing a source, be sure to represent the author’s argument accurately, in your own words. Even when paraphrasing an author’s work, you still must provide a citation to that work. For help with citations, go to the Purdue Online Writing Lab website at https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/.

The most common mistakes in social science literature reviews:

- Sources in your literature review do not clearly relate to the research problem or you do not identify the most relevant sources to use in the literature review related to the research problem;
- Relies exclusively on secondary analytical sources rather than including relevant primary research studies or data;
- Uncritically accepts another researcher’s findings and interpretations as valid, rather than examining critically all aspects of the research design and analysis;
- Only includes research that validates assumptions and does not consider contrary findings and alternative interpretations found in the literature.

Need more help?


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