

Writing a Literature Review

A literature review...

- Provides an overview and a critical evaluation of a body of literature relating to a research topic or a research problem.
- Analyzes a body of literature in order to classify it by themes or categories, rather than simply discussing individual works one after another.
- Presents the research and ideas of the field rather than each individual work or author by itself.

A literature review often forms part of a larger research project, such as within a thesis (or major research paper), or it may be an independent written work, such as a synthesis paper.

Purpose of a literature review

A literature review situates your topic in relation to previous research and illuminates a spot for your research. It accomplishes several goals:

- provides background for your topic using previous research.
- shows you are familiar with previous, relevant research.
- evaluates the depth and breadth of the research in regards to your topic.
- determines remaining questions or aspects of your topic in need of research.

Relationship between a literature review and a research project

Academic research at the graduate level is always part of a dialogue among researchers. As a graduate student, you must therefore indicate that you know where your topic is positioned within your field of study.

Therefore, a literature review is a key part of most research projects at the graduate level. There is often a **reciprocal relationship** between a literature review and the research project for which it is written:

- A research project is often undertaken in response to a literature review. Doing the literature review for a topic often reveals areas requiring further research. In this way, writing the literature review **helps to formulate the research question**.
- A literature review helps to **establish the validity of a research project** by revealing gaps in the existing literature on a topic that offer opportunities for new research.

Importance of the research question

Once identified, the research question will drive the research project. Whatever you read or write should have a clear connection to your question.

How to write a strong literature review

There are several steps toward writing a strong literature review:

1. Synthesize and evaluate information
2. Identify the main ideas of the literature
3. Identify the main argument of the literature review
4. Organize the main points of the literature review
5. Write literature review

1. Synthesize and evaluate information

A literature review requires critical thinking, reading, and writing. You will take the information that you have gathered through your research and synthesize and evaluate it by indicating important ideas and trends in the literature and explaining their significance.

Strategies for reading

- As soon as you begin reading, take note of the themes or categories that you see emerging. These may be used later to develop a structure for the literature review.
- Take note of how other writers classify their data, the literature in their fields, etc. It can be helpful to read literature reviews in your discipline to see how they are structured.

Categories for analysis and comparison

A strong literature review examines each work **on its own** and **in relation to other works** by identifying and then analyzing them with regards to a number of different research aspects and ideas. Here are some possible categories to use for comparison and analysis.

- topic
- argument
- results found and conclusions
- methods
- theoretical approach
- key words

Overall, a literature review seeks to answer the following questions:

- What does the literature tell you?
- What does the literature **not** tell you?
- Why is this important?

Questions for analyzing individual works

- What is the argument? Is it logically developed? Is it well defended?
- What kind of research is presented? What are the methods used? Do they allow the author to address your research question effectively? Is each argument or point based on relevant research? If not, why?
- What theoretical approach does the author adopt? Does it allow the researcher to make convincing points and draw convincing conclusions? Are the author's biases and presuppositions openly presented, or do you have to identify them indirectly? If so, why?
- Overall, how convincing is the argument? Are the conclusions relevant to the field of study?

Questions for comparing works

- What are the main arguments? Do the authors make similar or different arguments? Are some arguments more convincing than others?
- How has research been conducted in the literature? How extensive has it been? What kinds of data

have been presented? How pertinent are they? Are there sufficient amounts of data? Do they adequately answer the questions?

- What are the different types of methodologies used? How well do they work? Is one methodology more effective than others? Why?
- What are the different theoretical frameworks or approaches used? What do they allow the authors to do? How well do they work? Is one approach more effective than others? Why?
- Overall, is one work more convincing than others? Why? Or are the works you have compared too different to evaluate against each other?

The Academic Writing Help Centre offers more information on synthesis and evaluation in the discussion group and accompanying handout on *Information Management for a Literature Review*.

2. Identify the main ideas of the literature

Once you have begun to synthesize your research, you will begin to identify some main ideas and trends that pervade the topic or that pertain to your research question.

Use these main ideas to classify the information and sources that you have read. Later, these ideas can be used as the main topics of discussion in the literature review, and if you have already organized your literature on these topics, it will be easy to summarize the literature, find examples, etc.

3. Identify the main argument of the literature review

Just like any academic paper, the literature review should have a main idea about the literature that you would like the readers to understand. This argument is closely related to your research question in that it presents a situation in the body of literature which motivates your research question.

Example

Argument from a literature review: *"Although some historians make a correlation between the Ukrainian Catholic and Orthodox churches and the retention of Ukrainian culture and language by Ukrainian immigrants in Canada, little has been said of the role of the Roman Catholic Church in the development of Ukrainian communities in Canada."*

Research question: *"How has the Roman Catholic Church shaped Ukrainian-Canadian identity?"*

4. Organize the main points of the literature review

After identifying the main ideas that need to be presented in the literature review, you will organize them in such a way as to support the main argument. A well-organized literature review presents the relevant aspects of the topic in a coherent order that leads readers to understand the context and significance of your research question and project.

As you organize the ideas for writing, keep track of the supporting ideas, examples, and sources that you will be using for each point.

5. Write the literature review

Once the main ideas of the literature review are in order, writing can flow much more smoothly. The following tips provide some strategies to make your literature review even stronger.

Tips for Writing and Presentation

Give structure to the literature review.

Like any academic paper, a literature review should contain an **introduction**, a **body** and a **conclusion**, and should be centered on a **main idea or argument** about the literature you are reviewing.

If the literature review is a longer document or section, section headers can be useful to highlight the main points for the reader. However, the different sections should still flow together.

Explain the relevance of material you use and cite.

It is important to show that you know what other authors have written on your topic. However, you should not simply restate what others have said; rather, explain what the information or quoted material means in relation to your literature review.

- Is there a relevant connection between a specific quote or information and the corresponding argument or point you are making about the literature? What is it?
- Why is it necessary to include this piece of information or quote?

Use verb tenses strategically.

- **Present** tense is used for **relating** what other authors say and for discussing the literature, theoretical concepts, methods, etc.

"In her article on biodiversity, Jones stipulates that"

In addition, use the present tense when you **present your observations** on the literature.

"However, on the important question of extinction, Jones remains silent."

- **Past** tense is used for **recounting** events, results found, etc.
"Jones and Green conducted experiments over a ten-year period. They determined that it was not possible to recreate the specimen."

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