

4 STEP GUIDE TO WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW

1. WHAT IS A LITERATURE REVIEW?

A literature review is a description of the literature relevant to a particular field or topic.

It gives an overview of:



It may take two forms

- Purely descriptive – as in an annotated bibliography. A descriptive review should not just list and paraphrase, but should add comment and bring out themes and trends.
- A critical assessment of the literature in a particular field, stating where the weaknesses and gaps are, contrasting the views of particular authors, or raising questions. It will evaluate and show relationships, so that key themes emerge.

It can be

- A whole paper, which annotates and/or critiques the literature in a particular subject area.
- Part of a thesis or dissertation, forming an early context-setting chapter.
- a useful background outlining a piece of research, or putting forward a hypothesis.



DO

Look at the relationships between the views and draw out themes



DON'T

Just write a list or quote authors without citing them

2. THE STAGES OF A LITERATURE REVIEW

Define the problem

It is important to define the problem or area which you wish to address. Have a purpose for your literature review to narrow the scope of what you need to look out for when you read.

Carry out a search for relevant materials

Relevant materials will probably comprise:



Search the university or academic library with a good collection in your subject area. Search using the Internet – but be sure to avoid the pitfalls. Use specific rather than general keywords and phrases for your search strategy.

Evaluate the materials

Points to consider when evaluating material:

Initial appraisal from raw bibliographical data:

- Author credentials – are they an expert in the field? Are they affiliated to a reputable organization?
- Date of publication – is it sufficiently current or has knowledge moved on?
- If a book – is it the latest edition?
- If a journal – is it a peer reviewed scholarly journal?
- Is the publisher reputable and scholarly?

Appraisal based on content analysis:

- Is it addressing a scholarly audience?
- Does it review relevant literature?
- Is it an objective fact-based viewpoint? Is it logically organized and clear to follow?
- Does it follow a particular theoretical viewpoint, e.g. feminist?
- What is the relationship of this work to other material on the same topic – does it substantiate it or add a different perspective?
- If using research, is the design sound? Is it primary or secondary material?
- If it is from a practice-based perspective, what are the implications for practice?

Analyse the findings

- What themes emerge and what conclusions can be drawn?
- What are the major similarities and differences between the various writers?
- Are there any significant questions which emerge and which could form a basis for further investigation?



3. HOW TO ORGANIZE A LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Define the topic and state reasons for choice. You could also point out overall trends, gaps and themes that emerge.

Body

Discuss your sources. You can organize your discussion chronologically, thematically or methodologically.

Conclusion

Summarize the major contributions, evaluating the current position, and pointing out flaws in methodology, gaps in the research, contradictions and areas for further study.



YOU ARE NOW AT THE STAGE WHEN YOU CAN WRITE UP YOUR LITERATURE REVIEW.

4. FURTHER INFORMATION

These universities have good information on how to write a literature review:

- Deakin University – <http://www.deakin.edu.au/library/research/index.php>
- University of Wisconsin-Madison – <http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/ReviewofLiterature.html>
- University of North Carolina – <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/literature-reviews/>
- University of California, Santa Cruz – <http://library.ucsc.edu/ref/howto/> (Follow links to "Write a Literature Review".)

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