2. Writing a literature review

This guide aims to help you successfully craft a literature review for a research paper, dissertation or thesis.

1. What is a literature review?

A literature review is not an original contribution to knowledge. Nor is it a list describing the contents of one document after another, or an annotated bibliography, or an exercise in document analysis. It is an essay presenting an overview of literature relevant to your research question or thesis statement, as well as the thinking process you engaged in as you learned.\(^1\) According to Arlene Fink:

> A literature review surveys books, scholarly articles, and any other sources relevant to a particular issue, area of research, or theory, and by so doing, provides a description, summary, and critical evaluation of these works in relation to the research problem being investigated. Literature reviews are designed to provide an overview of sources you have explored while researching a particular topic and to demonstrate to your readers how your research fits within a larger field of study.\(^2\)

There are various types of literature review, depending on the approach you adopt and the type of analysis on which your research relies. These include argumentative, integrative, historical, methodological, systematic, and theoretical literature reviews.\(^3\) In higher degree research associated with theology, humanities and social sciences, a literature review will usually seek to identify the essential theories, problems, arguments, debates and controversies in a chosen field, highlighting the ways in which research has been done by others.

You might like to think of the literature review as a kind of treasure hunt, a touring and camping vacation, trawling for a prize catch of fish, or an exercise in map-making.

2. Do you need one?

Unless your research is entirely inductive, you will need to write a literature review. Early in your research project, or even to support degree candidacy or grant applications, you may be asked to produce a literature review to demonstrate your familiarity with the field. But you should expect your review to change and grow as your research argument develops and you discover new resources.\(^4\) It’s a cyclical process: your literature review will inform your research question, theory and methods; these will in turn help set the parameters of your review.

While you should make detailed notes as you read through the literature, Peter Levin explains the benefits of delaying the formal review:

> First, you don’t know when you’re starting work, which pieces of literature will be relevant to your future work and which ones will not. Second, you are likely to uncover fresh sources as your work proceeds: it is not a good use of your time to redo work each time you find a new source. Third, it is only when you are well advanced that you will be able to be properly critical of the books and articles that you are using. Writing a literature review when you aren’t yet on top of your material is one of the most mind-numbing, brain-deadening, sleep-inducing activities known to students.\(^5\)

---

3. For an outline of these types see http://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/literaturereview
3. What is the purpose of a literature review?

A good literature review enables generativity – the ability to build upon prior scholarship. But there is more to a literature review than a review of the literature. Your literature review should be a purposeful and convincing argument demonstrating your information-gathering and critical appraisal skills. It should inform readers of developments in your chosen field, establish your credibility as a researcher, and argue for the relevance and need for your own research agenda. It may also help to refine your research question and argument(s).

Depending on the nature of your research, the literature review may specifically aim to:

   a) Demonstrate your familiarity with existing work in your field;
   b) Identify the main methodologies and research techniques used in the past;
   c) Distinguish what has been done from what needs to be done;
   d) Establish the context of the topic or problem you wish to investigate;
   e) Bring coherence to the diversity of materials you have selected;
   f) Apply an established theory or methodology to a new field;
   g) Challenge or subvert current ideas and practices;
   h) Reveal gaps in current knowledge worthy of further exploration;
   i) Help future researchers understand why you undertook your research;
   j) Indicate a readiness to make your own contribution to the literature.

4. How to write your literature review

Before you start

You should already have a sense of your research question and area of specialization. Keep refining, clarifying and narrowing these. The keywords and phrases you use will enable you to develop a well-defined search strategy.

Look for effective models of research findings and literature reviews. Academic articles often contain abbreviated literature reviews in their opening paragraphs, and there are many examples online. You may also locate relevant published reviews in your field by typing “review” in a search engine along with keywords and phrases.

Consider also your intended audience: who will be reading your work, and what needs, expectations and questions might they have? Begin with the end in mind.

Structure and content

Your literature review should have a beginning, a middle, and an ending. The introduction should convey the organising principle of your review, which will be different from the focus of your research. Your research question or thesis statement provides the focus; the organising principle indicates how your discussion of the literature is structured around that focus.

In the body of the essay, you discuss the source material in a logical and coherent manner, showing how the literature creates a “space” for your research project. This is usually structured or scoped according to chronology (when the materials were published), theme (conceptual categories) or methodology (the methods used by the researcher or writer), although these may overlap.

The conclusion provides a summary of the salient points of your literature review. It should highlight the most significant sources, the key themes that have emerged, and how these serve to inform, refine and focus your research. You may also wish to acknowledge existing work that has laid the theoretical or methodological foundations for your own work.

---

7 See, for example, http://www.uq.edu.au/student-services/learning/lit-review-ex-1; or http://gateinsbe.intrasun.tcnj.edu/tcnj/rhetoric2/litreviews.htm
According to David E. Gray, a comprehensive and critical literature review should address the 12 criteria outlined in the following table. Consider using these criteria as a guide to assess the quality of your literature review. You could also apply these principles to see how a published literature review in your field measures up.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Coverage</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Justifies what is 'nearly in' the research but actually excluded. This helps to establish the boundaries of the research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Identifies the gaps in current knowledge and therefore the role and value of the current study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Shows that the topic or problem is linked to wider issues that have already merited research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Critically explores the background and history of the topic to contextualize current themes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Demonstrates that is able to link into and build upon the discourse through which the subject is studied and understood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Distinguishes between what is central to the argument/problem and what is peripheral or unimportant. Provides focus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Moves beyond a mere synopsis of the literature by providing a focus to reveal what is significant. Clarifies tensions and inconsistencies in the literature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Methodology</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>Critically evaluates how the topic has been researched to date to justify own choice of methodology.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Recognizes the methodological weaknesses of previous research and shows how they can be improved in the proposed study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Significance</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>Shows how the research contributes to practical solutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>K</td>
<td>Shows how the research contributes to knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Rhetoric</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>Moves beyond mere description to a set of logical, refined arguments.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

Selecting sources

For many researchers, the literature search is one of the most enjoyable experiences of the research cycle. But it can also be a harrowing task. In Visualizing Research, Carol Gray and Julian Malins offer this advice:

In searching for information, be prepared to be simultaneously depressed and excited – depressed because you cannot find anything to match your needs exactly, and excited because this means that your line of inquiry could be unusual or even unique. Be prepared to step out of both your subject area ... and even your discipline.¹⁰

On the other hand, if you feel overwhelmed by the amount of material you have identified as relevant, you may need to narrow the focus of your research.

Source selection and evaluation are integral to the research process, as the following chart shows:¹¹

A literature review will normally focus on primary sources (high-quality original research published in books and journals). Secondary sources include critical evaluations and syntheses of original material, and are often useful in identifying and assessing primary sources. Tertiary sources usually comprise information and ideas drawn from secondary sources (for example, textbooks that offer a broad overview of a topic).

Sources may include published and unpublished material, both print and electronic. Most review literature will probably be in the form of books by a single author, chapters in edited books, and journal articles. You may also discover relevant material in books of collected articles, review articles, opinion pieces and commentaries, conference papers, case studies, official publications, statistics, and "grey literature" (material lacking an ISBN OR ISSN when published, such as theses and dissertations, archival material, websites, emails, newspaper articles, photographs, video material, advertisements, pamphlets/brochures, and publications by clubs and societies).¹²

Always cast a wide net. Begin by searching catalogues and databases, and reading recent published work in your field.¹³ Follow the trail of references. Look for previous literature reviews on related topics. Don't confine your search to your topic, or to your discipline. Academics, librarians and research specialists may provide valuable information and support as you conduct your literature search. Record all relevant publication data for each item you peruse, as one of the greatest frustrations of academic research is being unable to use material because you lack citation data. For a web page, record the URL, and the date on which you accessed the page. It's also a good idea to save a copy of the web page you found, as it may subsequently be altered or removed from the Internet.

¹¹ Source: http://www.library.dmu.ac.uk/Images/Howto/LiteratureSearch.pdf
¹² For more information see the Grey Literature Network Service at http://www.greynet.org/
¹³ On choosing search terms see David E. Gray, op. cit., pp. 101f; and O'Leary, op. cit., pp. 91-94.
Applying filters helps to manage the process of selecting relevant material. Consider using the following filters:

a) **Relevance.** What material directly contributes to the development of your research question or thesis statement? For books, peruse the table of contents, introduction, and blurb for relevance to your project. Concluding paragraphs in chapters may also provide clues. For journal articles, check the abstract for relevance. Feel free to include your own research in a literature review, but try to be objective.

b) **Authority.** How is the author qualified to write on the subject? Do other authors refer to his/her work as seminal or generative? Was the material peer reviewed, or professionally edited? Is the publisher reputable? Has the material been critically evaluated or assessed by other authors?

c) **Quality.** Has the author acknowledged his or her bias? Has the author used logical methods that deliver valid and/or authentic conclusions? Is the author consistent in his or her methodology? Does the material present opposing viewpoints that provide a sense of balance? Is the author’s objectivity lost in polemical excess? Are their conclusions compelling? Can the research be independently verified? Be cautious regarding the quality and authenticity of material on websites.  

d) **Currency.** Are you keeping up to date with new research? Is the material you are reading still influential in the field? Don’t overlook or discount older studies without good reason; but more recent work in a field should usually take precedence over older material.

**Evaluation, analysis and synthesis**

Sooner or later, you will need to shift focus to organising and evaluating your material – although the literature search may continue in the background. Catalogue the material to make it more accessible. Use quotes sparingly in your review. Use subheadings strategically as they help identify what you regard as key themes in your research, and alert readers to the logic of your approach. Attend seminars and workshops on academic writing skills. The following table outlines four essential skills for critical engagement with the literature:  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>Select, differentiate, break up</td>
<td>Dissecting data into their constituent parts in order to determine the relationship between them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthesis</td>
<td>Integrate, combine, formulate, reorganize</td>
<td>Rearranging the elements derived from analysis to identify relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension</td>
<td>Understand, distinguish, explain</td>
<td>Interpreting and distinguishing between different types of data, theory and argument to describe the substance of an idea.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Define, classify, describe, name</td>
<td>Describing the principles, uses and function of rules, methods and events.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As you read a selected document and begin the writing process, ask yourself questions like these:  

1. Has the author clearly defined the problem or issue? Is its significance clearly established?  
2. How does the author structure his or her argument?  
3. What is the author’s theoretical framework/orientation (e.g., Reformed, feminist, critical realist)?  
4. Has the author adequately evaluated the literature relevant to the problem/issue?  
5. How does the author address disagreements with others in the field?  
6. Are the author’s conclusions objective and validly based upon the data and analysis?  
7. In what ways does this book or article contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the field in question? What are its strengths and limitations?  
8. How does this book or article relate to the specific research question or thesis I am developing?  

---

15 David E. Gray, op. cit., p. 115.
16 Adapted from Dena Taylor, “The literature review: A few tips on conducting it,” [http://advice-writing.utoronto.ca/types-of-writing/literature-review/](http://advice-writing.utoronto.ca/types-of-writing/literature-review/)
Common mistakes to avoid

In crafting a successful literature review, there are many mistakes and traps to avoid. In the blank column, write down what you would need to do to avoid each problem. Which problems are you most likely to encounter?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Possible solutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Failure to read widely</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Emphasis on outdated material</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Failure to discriminate between relevant and irrelevant material</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Reliance on secondary sources rather than on relevant primary sources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Exclusion of seminal publications or landmark studies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Emphasis on summarising rather than critically evaluating existing literature</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Selected material does not clearly relate to the research question or thesis statement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Selected material validates researcher’s assumptions and excludes contrary findings and alternative interpretations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Lack of a clear organizational structure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Structure organised around individual items rather than themes/issues/methodologies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Findings of literature review do not clearly relate to researcher’s own question/thesis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Further reading

Flick, Uwe, An Introduction to Qualitative Research (5th edn; Los Angeles: Sage, 2014), pp. 65-73.