

PURPOSE

A literature review provides an analytical summary of published material on a given topic by categorizing and comparing the findings of relevant articles, books, research studies, etc. The review points out strengths and weaknesses in this existing research to establish a context and need for *new* research. A literature review can be an independent assignment but is usually part of a larger project. Formats may vary according to discipline or assignment, so always consult a supervising faculty member for guidance.

GETTING STARTED

- Before you begin your research, reread your assignment carefully. Identify what kinds of sources (books, journal articles, dissertations) and what timeframe are appropriate for your research.
- Review abstracts to get a sense of what has been written on your topic and what needs more exploration.
- Seek sources with differing viewpoints; always check the credibility of authors and publication venues.
- Read literature reviews published in your field to get a sense of structure and style.
- Remember that your review of literature can inform or even change the eventual focus of your project; don't lock yourself into a certain perspective until you have studied existing research.

COMPONENTS OF A LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

Describe the topic. Explain your reasons for examining the literature and why the topic is worthy of research by pointing out major gaps, trends, or conflicts in the literature; these ideas will serve as the controlling idea/thesis for your review. You may wish to explain the elements around which you will organize your review (see *Body*, below) and/or the scope (a certain timeframe or genre) of the literature you will address.

BODY

Organize your summaries of sources around a common theme or characteristic such as chronology; research methodologies or theories; authors' purposes, findings, conclusions, etc. Identify and analyze each source's contribution to the topic, and be sure to address differing viewpoints. Note how this organizing structure distinguishes a literature review from an annotated bibliography, which simply lists sources one by one. Literature reviews also differ from research papers in that no *new* arguments or unpublished primary research are included.

CONCLUSION

Summarize the most important contributions your sources make to the specific topic outlined in your introduction. You may want to connect these points to a larger discipline or profession. State what your review of the literature has demonstrated about the topic: Were new questions raised? Are there areas where further study is needed? Are shortcomings in the existing research now apparent?

OTHER TIPS FOR AN EFFECTIVE LITERATURE REVIEW

- While a literature review deals only with other scholars' findings, maintain your *own* voice by avoiding overuse of direct quotations; summarize and paraphrase whenever possible.
- Make sure that you have contextualized and analyzed *each* source and its relevance to your larger project.
- Check that the majority of your paragraphs begin with ideas or themes – not authors' names – to avoid making your review read like an annotated bibliography.
- Review all in-text and end-of-document citations for adherence to appropriate style guidelines (APA, CMS, IEEE, etc.) for your assignment/discipline.