

Reviewing the Literature

A Critical Review

A literature review is a document which explores and evaluates the literature on a specific topic or question. Broadly, the aim of the literature review is to determine what is known on the topic, how well this knowledge is established and where future research might best be directed.

A literature review is not the same as an annotated bibliography. The latter describes and evaluates each text in turn. A literature review synthesises the contributions of the different authors and comments on their strength and relative contribution.

Tertiary students may be required to write a critical literature review at the undergraduate or postgraduate level. It may be a standalone document or part of a larger body of research, such as a thesis.

The point of a standalone literature review is to demonstrate that you have read widely in your field and you understand the main arguments. As part of a thesis or research paper, the literature review serves to define your project not only by establishing baseline information, but also where you agree or disagree with previous work and how your work adopts or rejects others' methodological approaches.

Structure

A standalone literature review is structured much like an academic essay.

- Introduction - establish the context for your topic and outline your main contentions about the literature
- Main body - explain and support these inferences in the main body
- Conclusion - summarise your main points and restate the contention.

(See AS flyer: Writing Successful Essays)

The main difference between an essay and this kind of literature review is that an essay focuses on a topic, and uses the literature as a support for the arguments. In a standalone literature review, the literature itself is the topic of discussion and evaluation. This means you evaluate and discuss not only the informational content, but the quality of the author's handling of the content.

As part of a larger research paper, the literature review may take many forms, depending on your discipline, your topic and the logic of your research. Traditionally, in empirical research, the literature review is included in the introduction, or a standalone chapter immediately following the introduction. For other forms of research, you may need to engage more extensively with the literature and thus, the literature review may spread over more than one chapter, or even be distributed throughout the thesis.

For all literature reviews, there are many possible ways to organise the material. For example:

- chronologically
- by theoretical perspective
- from most to least important
- by issue or theme

It is important to remember that you are not merely cataloguing or describing the literature you read. Therefore, you need to choose an organisation that will enable you to compare the various authors' treatment of ideas. This is often best achieved by organising thematically, or grouping ideas into sets of common issues tackled in the various texts. These themes will form the basis of the different threads that are the focus of your study.

Determining your topic

Occasionally, students are given a specific question to research, but more often they are given broad topics which must be refined to a question that can be reasonably addressed in the time and word limit available. Use your early reading to help you determine how much your topic needs refining and the direction it will take.

If you find a very large amount of literature on your topic, or mostly old literature, you probably need to narrow your scope. This may be achieved by identifying issues of interest within the literature on your topic which may prove suitable for your literature research.

The reverse is also true: if you select a very specific topic or question, you may find little or no literature in your searches, and this indicates that your topic needs to be broadened.

Finding the Literature

'Literature' can include a range of sources:

- journal articles
- monographs
- computerised databases
- conference proceedings
- dissertations
- empirical studies
- government reports and reports from other bodies' historical records
- statistical handbooks

At the undergraduate level it is likely to consist mainly of scholarly books and online or hard copy journals. Subject text books are unsuitable, as their content is broad and generally derived from many sources. Avoid material openly published on the internet as its quality may not have been assessed.

Readings suggested by your lecturers or supervisors are an excellent start as they are often influential within your area of research. You will need to supplement these broadly with quality research. You should aim to find recent literature which is peer reviewed.

Peer reviewed articles can be found by searching key terms through the databases on the library website. Some databases also provide details about authors who have cited a particular article. Following the research of authors who cite your key texts can yield information closer to the heart of your topic.

Consult your subject research guide on the library website, or speak to your subject librarian to identify the most useful databases for you. Also, learn Boolean logic; it is easy and can save time finding suitable references.

Cover the field

Make sure your literature search covers the range of views and information relevant to your topic. You are not expected to cover all research and scholarly opinions on your topic, but you cannot neglect important viewpoints. Also, you will not produce a quality literature review if you select only that material that reinforces your own ideas.

Tips on reading

Survey, skim and scan to find the most relevant articles, and the most relevant parts of those articles. These can be re-read more closely later when you have acquired an overview of your topic. Take notes as you read to organise and develop your thoughts. Record your own reactions to the text in your notes, perhaps in a separate column. These notes can form the basis of your critical evaluation of the text. Record any facts, opinions or direct quotes that are likely to prove useful to your review, noting the page numbers.

When do you stop reading?

This depends on the word count required of this literature review. A review of one thousand words can only cover the major ideas and probably less than ten references. Longer reviews that form part of a large research paper will include more than fifty.

As you read, ask yourself these questions:

- Have I answered my question without any obvious gaps?
- Are no new related issues coming up as I search the literature?
- Have I found multiple references which cover the same material or just enough to prove agreement?

Keep complete records of all the citation details of any references read as you read them, to avoid misquoting.

When do you start writing?

Start writing early, when you feel you have an overview of the topic. Writing will clarify your thinking on the topic and reveal any gaps in information and logic. If your ideas change, sections and paragraphs can be reworked to change your contentions or include extra information. Similarly, draft an overall plan for your review as soon as you are ready, but be prepared to rework sections of it to reflect your developing argument.

In the best literature reviews

The writer:

- Has a clear understanding of key concepts within the topic
- Covers the breadth of the writer's specific topic
- Critically discusses the ideas in the literature and evaluate how the author presents these
- Clarifies important definitions and terminology
- Clearly indicates a research gap for future enquiry

Further Resources

University of Melbourne. Courseworks. *Literature Review*.

http://courseworks.unimelb.edu.au/research_and_writing/literature_reviews

Monash University. Writing *Literature reviews*.

<http://www.monash.edu.au/lls/llonline/writing/general/lit-reviews/index.xml>

The University of Canberra. *Writing a Literature Review*.

<http://www.canberra.edu.au/studyskills/writing/literature>

Academic Skills