



Literature Review

Definition: A literature review is a survey of scholarly sources that provides an overview of a particular topic and identifies and assesses relevant theoretical or methodological issues. As part of a thesis or dissertation, it places your research within a broader context; it may also include studies in related areas that are relevant to your topic.

Where to begin? The best place to start is with your research question. What is the relationship between that question and the scholarship on the topic? Are there foundational articles/seminal works which must be included? Is there a central debate that should be acknowledged and addressed? Where is the topic headed in the future? The narrower the scope of your topic, the easier it will be to limit the number of sources you need to read in order to get a good survey of the material.

The structure. The lit review should be organized to best reflect your purpose. Are you primarily concerned with the development of the field or the arguments that have shaped it? Is your research more oriented to methodology? Are there dominant or recurring themes in the field that occur in your own research? Has the work of dominant figures in the field influenced its evolution? Are there controversies or philosophical differences among researchers? Answering these questions will help you decide how to organize the review, whether it's chronological, theoretical, or methodological.

The process. Once you have your organization in place, you can begin to synthesize the literature. To do so, place each work in the context of its contribution to the understanding of the subject. Describe the relationship of each work to the others under consideration. Discuss the validity of assumptions and findings. Address conflicts amongst seemingly contradictory previous studies. Identify new ways to interpret, and shed light on any gaps in, previous research.

The elements. Your *introduction* will provide a brief overview of the topic of the literature review. The body of the lit review is your *discussion*, organized into sections, either chronologically, thematically, or methodologically as suggested above. Each section should provide a brief overview of the subject of that section, a discussion that compares the works with one another, and an assessment of the relative merits of each work within its area of research. In the *conclusion*, you summarize the main points from the review and set your own work in the context of the existing literature.

More resources:

These writing center websites provide more detailed information about writing a literature review, including examples.

ucsc.edu/write-a-literature-review

wisc.edu/handbook/assignments/reviewofliterature

usc.edu/writingguide/literaturereview