

Literature Reviews

The purpose of a literature review is to *review*, or survey and read, the literature surrounding a certain topic area and then summarizing the sources reviewed.

Literature reviews provide a written overview of the most current and relevant literature on a specific topic. The main objective of any literature review is to read, assimilate, and write about the literature published on the subject matter under study. *Literature* refers to relevant sources of information or research published on the assigned topic. The literature will inform you about the research that has already been conducted on your chosen subject. If you are going to propose your own study, as when writing a thesis, dissertation, or research proposal, your literature review must be relevant to the work you plan to do.

A literature review is NOT an annotated bibliography. You will not start a new section each time you discuss a new work; several works can be mentioned in the same paragraph. While an annotated bibliography only demonstrates how particular sources will be used in a study, a literature review also shows how the sources interact with each other.

At the end of your literature review, you will provide a works cited, bibliography, or references page. The format will depend on your field and the required formatting guidelines. Tasks you likely want to accomplish in your literature review include the following:

- Show where you think previous research has left gaps.
- Distinguish various theoretical strains.
- If proposing a study, specify which theory your work will be in line with.
- Define terms that will be important for a proposed study.

While specific requirements may differ depending on your discipline, professor, and assignment, there are some general rules that usually apply. As with any assignment, always **follow the assignment instructions for specific requirements, confer with your professor as needed, and refer to the grading rubric for additional details**. Consider the following guidelines as you prepare to review the literature and write the review:

- Do not procrastinate! Start working as early as possible.
- Literature reviews almost always require scholarly sources, most often articles from peer-reviewed, academic journals.
- There are two kinds of research articles: *empirical* and *review*.
- Empirical articles describe original research. This means that there is a clearly labeled “methods” section, “results” section, and “discussion” section, containing an original research study that contributes to the field. These articles will almost always also include a literature review before discussing the research study, illustrating how the study will contribute to previous research.
- Review articles are essentially peer-reviewed, scholarly literature reviews. They examine many empirical studies and synthesize them into a current “review” of the topic. It may be helpful to read these types of articles when writing your own literature review to see how they are structured.

Reviewing the Literature

When reading through your sources, you want to remember that you are looking for the “big picture,” not a collection of random, separate articles. **You are looking for common themes and patterns in the research as a whole. You are also looking for gaps,** focusing on those areas of your topic still in need of further research. (Usually this can be found in the very last section of academic journal articles, labeled “future research.”) Also ask yourself, are there any research studies in this area that contradict each other? (Usually there are, so be sure to look for these!)

A helpful way to find common themes and patterns in your research is to **write out a brief paragraph on each article or source that you read.** Always begin by writing the last names of the author(s) and the date, so that you can easily find this information again. **Tip: Be sure to save your articles in a folder if you are reading through a University online journal database.** Then, after you read the article or source, write out your summary. It may be helpful to use bullet points, numbered lists, or whatever you feel like using to help you record what you read. Your paragraph can be as long or short as you want it to be, but it should not be more than a page. Often, only a few sentences are needed to meet the objective. Keep the following in mind as you write your summaries:

- If the article is empirical, write down the results of the research study in your own words (one or two sentences). An example would be, “Individuals who lived in Area A were more likely to be dog owners than individuals who lived in Area B.” This is a solid sentence that informs the reader of the main point of the study.
- If the article is a review, look for the main point. It may be helpful to read or skim the whole article, look away, and ask yourself, “What was the main idea?”
- Other information you may want to include in your paragraph: any limitations or gaps you noticed, anything that seems to contradict something you read elsewhere, or key points that you think are important or interesting.
- If the article is empirical, write down the methods that were used, the research design, the number of participants, and the type of population.
- You may also want to write down the names of the statistical procedures used to analyze the data, along with some of the statistics, depending on your assignment.

The number of sources needed will depend upon your assignment, professor, and level of study. In general, undergraduate students will usually be required to use somewhere between five and 20 sources; graduate students typically will need between 20 and 40. However, the number can vary greatly, so **always read your requirements and ask your professor.**

After you have read your sources and written your paragraphs, you will probably have a general idea of what the literature says. However, it can be difficult to see common themes when you have many sources. At this point, it is helpful to **go through your paragraphs and try to group them according to theme or idea.** For example, imagine your general topic is dog ownership in North America. You may find that you have three research studies that all had the same finding, such as “Individuals who lived in Area A were more likely to be dog owners than individuals who lived in Area B.” You may also have three other studies that also had a different finding, such as “Individuals who lived in the South appeared to have more multiple dog households than those who lived in the North.”

This process can be challenging and time management is critical, so remember to start working as early as possible. At this point, you will want to spend quality time with your literature; **look for themes, patterns, and ideas, as well as contradictions and gaps.**

If you wrote out your paragraphs by hand, it can be helpful to use highlighters or markers to color-code your groupings and make categories. For example, use one color to represent one theme or common finding and a different color for another theme or finding; then, mark each paragraph with the appropriate color. Some paragraphs may have multiple markings because you find that they address multiple ideas. Alternatively, you could simply write out the themes and ideas you noticed. Use whatever system works for you. However you accomplish the task, **the focus centers on spending time with your literature, thinking critically, and looking for commonalities and gaps so that you can integrate the information into a whole.**

Writing the Literature Review

Most literature reviews consist of the standard sections of a research paper: an introduction, the body of the paper, and a conclusion. In beginning the literature review with an introduction, some disciplines will require you to label your introduction with a heading of “Introduction.” However, other disciplines, such as those following APA formatting guidelines, do not want you to label the introduction, so be sure to comply with the formatting style required for your field of study. Also, as always, be familiar with your assignment instructions and your professors’ preferences.

- ▶ **Introduction:** Defend the importance of the topic. Give a broad overview of the scope of the work you are reviewing. Clarify whether you are looking at the entire history of the field or only a particular period of time.
- ▶ **Body:** Summarize the works you are reviewing. Just as in any written assignment, use logical organization and clear transitions. Spend more time on the relevant people and works that are considered most important in the field.
- ▶ **Conclusion:** Predict where research in the field will go next. If you are proposing your own research study, show how you will contribute to the field. The conclusion would also be an appropriate place to defend the importance of the topic, now that you have demonstrated the current state of thinking in the field.