

Writing a Literature Review

Defining the Literature Review:

Most academic writing presents evidence from new experimental results. The literature review, however, sets out to investigate and summarize the research and debates that already surround a given topic, to provide context for the direction of research within that topic. No new results will be found in a literature review. The ultimate purpose of a literature review is to investigate what is known about a topic, identify what is NOT known, and highlight any other important issues or controversies within the current body of research.

Describe the topic. Imagine someone who has never investigated this topic is now reading your paper - how much will they understand? Provide a brief introduction and background of what is being discussed, and prepare to knit theories together to formulate a “big picture.” Keep your audience in mind, and provide them with enough detail to understand the literature that you are about to present.

Summarize the literature to date. Answer the “who, what, when, where, and why” questions regarding the body of literature you have read and digested. Who is performing the research? What were the variables measured? What major points have been discovered and debated? What type of methodology was used? Were there any methodological limitations? How long ago was the study completed? How has the research progressed over time? Finally, why is this research conducted and what real-world relevance does it have?

Explore any contradictions or inconsistencies within the literature. After summarizing the pertinent information in the review, discuss/evaluate it in terms of “comparing and contrasting.” Have variations in research methods led to different results? Discuss sampling procedures, controls, and confounding variables. Have certain results been consistent over time? A thorough evaluation of previous research will lead directly to the next step.

Suggest new research paths. The purpose of evaluating the past is to plan for the future. Evaluating research methodologies in the body of the review should result in proposing a next step in researching the phenomenon. How can previous questions or inconsistencies be dealt with? What new technology can be employed that was not previously available? What new technologies are needed to make progress?

A Step by Step Guide for Writing a Literature Review

1) Ensure the chosen topic fits the following criteria:

- Is there an audience that is interested in it? (Perhaps your professor has given a list of topics.)
- Is the scope of the topic narrow enough to write about knowledgeably? For example, there are many thousands of studies dealing with Cognitive Psychology, but less than 50 studies addressing Phenomenological Testing Methods Using Videoconferencing in Treating Alzheimer's Patients.
- Has the topic been sufficiently researched to provide a body of work sizable enough to review? Topics about which next to nothing is known provide no material for analysis, synthesis, or discussion.

2) Collecting and reading relevant articles

- Determine the major concepts (no more than two or three) that are pertinent to the proposed research question. What are the concepts that must be true in order for your question to be appropriate? What sort of information will support or dispute the hypothesis?
- Even a short literature review will cover a large number of sources. Always try to find more sources than you can use.
- Keep in mind the value of your sources – are they peer-reviewed primary sources, like journal articles? If not, can you track your information back to a primary source?
- Research databases can be accessed through the UNBC library.
- Search for your topic by typing in keywords and scanning the results.
 - If it seems that there is no full text available, watch for the “Get it @ UNBC” button to see if there are additional access options. Articles that the library does not have direct access to can be obtained through inter-library loan.
 - When scanning results, read abstracts first. If the abstract seems relevant, scan the full text.
 - If you find a particularly relevant article, use its references to supplement your knowledge and discover more research on the topic.
 - When you find relevant results, watch for new keywords within it. You may find a whole new avenue of relevant research just by picking up on some new terms.

- Make an annotated bibliography. While reading the articles, take notes on the main points of the articles, including the research question, hypothesis, findings, and discussion. This initial summarizing will streamline the process of analyzing the information and writing the review.
- Email the authors of relevant articles to obtain more information. Most researchers are happy to be contacted by someone who is interested in their work, and may willingly send you copies of their articles or even unpublished information.

3) Planning the Review:

- Develop an outline before you begin writing. Having an outline will help ensure your document is organized and easy to read. If you find that your understanding of a topic changes as you write, adjust the outline!
- One strategy for developing your outline is to list all the major concepts in a descending order of importance and see if the organization looks logical. Once organized, use those concepts as subheadings, then list the relevant articles under them.
- Add a brief summary (around one paragraph) of the combined findings of the papers under each concept, to help you organize your facts. This strategy also helps to integrate the findings of each paper into the section, rather than a paragraph consisting of a list of isolated findings from each.
- While you are planning, you may find it useful to attempt to argue each side of the issue, so that you are more familiar with the views and potential debates of each author you are presenting.

4) Writing the Review

- Introduce the research question and why it is worth examining. While introducing it, narrow the research question to the focus of the studies you have chosen to discuss.
- Outline the organization of the paper. For example, if you are discussing two sides of a controversy, say so. If there are several methodologies that have been used in the past, list them in the order in which they will appear.
- Describe the main points of the studies according to the organization that has been established. Remember that you are describing research that occurred in the past, and use the appropriate tense in your descriptions.
- Compare and contrast the studies in terms of findings, methodologies, and current paradigms. Evaluate the integrity of the studies using various measures of validity (content, construct, criterion, face, internal, external).

- Summarize the conclusions of the review. The conclusion is one of the most important parts! What did we learn from examining these studies side by side? Are there any similarities or contrasts that are especially important? Did the examination of the methodology and validity of the studies reveal anything that should be considered? Have there been any advances since these studies were conducted that could change the outlook or methodology of the research? Should this topic, or a specific aspect of it, be examined in more detail in the future? ***Where should we go from here?***
- Throughout your document, try to make good use of paraphrasing and summarizing. Your literature review will be discussing the ideas and research of others, but that does not mean you cannot explain it in your own words. Hide your information so that you can't refer to it, then try to describe the important points to someone who is not familiar with it—you just paraphrased the information, and you did it in your own voice. A paper that is merely a string of quotes with no additional insight is difficult to read, and misses the point of doing a literature review – you must integrate the information together to show the “big picture” and any gaps therein. No deep analysis is involved in simply quoting the research that exists.
- Watch out for bias! Even if you have come to an opinion about the research, make it your goal to present the information in an objective manner. Do not assume the reader will agree with your viewpoint, and do not take it upon yourself to tell them how they should feel about it! By presenting all the relevant evidence, they will be free to come to their own conclusions.