What is a review of the literature?

A literature review is an assessment of published scholarship on a topic within a specified academic discipline. In writing the literature review, your purpose should be to convey to your reader a coherent analysis of the development of current knowledge in the selected area of study, including summaries of research conclusions, methodologies currently employed to research a topic, and either suggestions for further study, or a narrowly focused proposal for what will be studied next by the individual performing the literature review.

Review of the literature studies are often performed to determine what questions can further develop existing or new knowledge within a discipline. They:

1. are organized around and related directly to the thesis or research question you are developing
2. synthesize results into a summary of what is known
3. identify areas of controversy in the literature
4. formulate questions that need further research

As a piece of writing, the literature review must be defined by a guiding concepts that demonstrates this concern (e.g., formulated as a research objective, as a stated problem, or as an issue in contemporary debate.) A review of the literature is not the same as a research paper, but is guided by a focus that arrives at a specific conclusion and/or suggestive application. The review of the literature forefronts its findings while research papers often arrive at conclusions as a result of an investigative analysis. The former forefronts the claims and findings of research with supporting detail while the latter summarizes research to arrive at conclusions. At the same time, a review of the literature is not just a descriptive list of the material available, a set of summaries, or an annotated bibliography of books/articles with connecting transitions. A literature review attempts to represent a synthesis of common themes in such readings with the goal of providing a “state of the art” summary concerning what the current conversation is in a particular area of disciplinary inquiry/study.

A review of the literatures may be a chapter in a thesis or dissertation, a full length paper, an extended subsection of a paper, or several paragraphs of introductory assessment in an analytic essay or research report. A literature review represents an argument about the current state of the art in a area of study in a discipline, but it also represents a narrative reading of that state of art. It is not a list that summarizes one piece of literature after another.
Composing a review of the literature

Literature Reviews are a specific genre and have specific genre conventions. They differ significantly from a research paper. Where research papers/essays depend on various literatures to develop and support the argument of the essay, the writer mobilizes supporting literatures to augment the argument that he or she is making about the research. A review of the literature is conducted as either an exemplar or an exhaustive presentation of the arguments central to the normative knowledge of a given area or topic within a discipline of study. Claims and findings are fore-fronted and supporting detail is supplied. The goal is to produce a coherent picture of the state-of-the-art in an area of study (or its lack). Most such studies begin globally and continue to narrow until a specific body of literature germane to a problematic identified by the reviewer has been synthesized.

Genre in the process of composing

An extended review of the literature tends to follow a predictable format:

1. **Introduction:** Introduce the topic to be reviewed and provide a preview of the divisions to be considered in what is to follow.

2. **Problem Statement** (also known as the rationale): describe the significance of the research you are reviewing and/or the importance of conducting such a review. There are two basic strategies for articulating a rationale. One strategy is called a negative rationale, where you might argue that previous research has failed to address a particular area of concern. Another strategy is called positive rationale, where you might claim there would be practical or theoretical benefits to exploring some topic in more detail. Positive rationale is generally perceived as the stronger of the two strategies. The problem statement must identify a problematic to be addressed in the remainder of the study—a concern to be resolved by way of processing the literature or a concern that one must understand the literature to be processed before entertaining a possible solution to be addressed in the remainder of the project/thesis.

3. **Review:** The review is more than just a string of individual abstracts. It is a thorough review organized around a specific thesis. The problem statement should include a clear focus for the review. Clear and smooth transitions between main points are especially important. The reader should be guided to a clear conclusion by the information and arguments presented in the review. In a review of the literature, some sources may be treated in great detail, while the majority of others are mentioned only briefly as examples or supporting/complementary evidence.

4. **Critical Evaluation:** Restate the thesis of your paper and summarize key points in an evaluative manner. This is where you tell readers why this review was necessary or clarifying to what you are up to in a larger research project. Indicate the implications of the review, such as any new research questions, applications of existing research, or integration of diverse sources. If the review was conducted with the goal of supporting a specific inquiry or research project, the conclusion should clarify how

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the literature(s) examined support the argument under consideration in your overall presentation.

Ordering in the process of composing

The question may arise, “How do I determine the order by which the subject matter should be reviewed?” Various Orderings can be employed.

1. Topical/Thematic
2. Historical/Chronological
3. General-to-Specific
4. Known-to-unknown
5. Problem/Solution or Problem/Cause/Solution

A strategy to organize your literature review must be determined. If more than one heading will divide the subject matter of your assessment, the reviewer must determine whether all subsections will follow the same ordering framework. Generally, if you have more than one subdivision within your review, you will want to employ the same ordering structure unless you indicate a justification to adopt a different order in a specific section.

Most literature reviews appropriate to a communication context tend to follow topical, historical, or the general-to-specific designs. In styles 1-4, the reviewer does well to imagine a three dimensional funnel and move through the material making increasingly specific discriminations to arrive at the desired climax that points the way forward either to the specific thesis of the larger project or specific areas in which greater study is necessary.

If you have already written an annotated bibliography, you will need to reframe the material by synthesizing a discussion of related material. This is easier to do if you have an existing annotated bibliography because you will have already identified the themes and concepts of critical assessment relevant to your area of inquiry.

Style guide in the process of composing

Summaries of research should be recorded in an appropriate style guide format (APA or MLA). The literature of the subject matter you have chosen will indicate which should be followed. For example, if the preponderance of studies in the subject area are formatted in APA style, then the reviewer needs to select APA as the appropriate style guide for referencing works. It is the responsibility of the reviewer to recognize the difference between the two styles and select the appropriate one. Both styles have moved toward parenthetical citation. APA is more rigorous in its assumption that most studies can be reduced to their findings. MLA still recognizes that moments of insight in the processing of ideas may matter more than the final conclusions. Hence, writers using MLA occasionally quote a source because the writer’s eloquence would suffer in summary. It is rare that a writer is quoted in APA, since this style guide places emphasis on the findings rather than how well findings are stated.
Voice in the process of composing

What a review of the literature is “up to” is distinctly shaped by the voice that controls the intention of the study. This notion of voice has to do with identity—who is speaking—and the identity of the group that voice constructs as its implied listeners—who is responding. Literary critics employ the term to name the implied identity of the author who tells the story. Voice describes a dialogic experience of identity creation between author and audience, sometimes embedded more in the experience than the expression of the story. For literary critics, it answers the question ‘who speaks?’ regardless of the point-of-view of any characters within a tale. Applied to the composition of a literature review, the authoritative nature of the voice embodied in the identity the reviewer assumes as a participant in the conversation about which he or she is writing.

It is also important to adopt a formal evaluative voice. The reviewer must take up the voice of one who is authorized to synthesize existing literature as a preface to whatever use this synthesis will be applied. Thus, the reviewer does not merely describe what others have said or written, but must always sift what has been proposed by way of what has been proposed by other studies in an evaluative effort to arrive at a better or more coherent understanding of the state-of-the-art. This evaluative voice is central. It should not be overly authoritative, but it should convey the sense of a sure hand. Your goal is to inspire confidence among your readers that they are in the hands of a sure-footed overview of what can be said about the subject matter.

When a review of the literature is only one section or one chapter of a larger problematic under discussion, the surety with which the reviewer demonstrates control of existing literature inspires confidence that the project, to which the review is a part, is a worthwhile contribution to knowledge in this field of inquiry/study.

One may use the first person singular in formulating a thesis statement or a problematic to be addressed by the study as a whole. In other words, a writer may choose to say, “In this study I will….. etc.” However, it is unusual to bring in the first person voice while reviewing what others have said about the subject. One does not engage in personal reflection in the course of a review of the literature since this reflection is already present in the choices the reviewer makes to tell the story of the state-of-the-art in the discipline.

Steps in the process of composing

The following steps should be used as a guide in the compositional process:

1. In choosing a topic area, refer to the appropriate handbooks to determine whether the area is an existing division within the disciplinary inquiry; e.g., Fredric M. Jablin and Linda Putnam. (2000). The New Handbook of Organizational Communication: Advances in Theory, Research, and Methods. Sage Publications. For a list of other relevant resources to focus the first stage of your inquiry see Rubin, R. B., Rubin, A. M., & Pielc, L. J. (2000). Communication research: Strategies and sources (5th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. 91-108

2. Narrow the focus of the study until you can formulate a specific statement of the problem at issue or the rationale for the review you will undertake.

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3. Next you must identify the basic trends and developments in the topic area(s) of your review.

4. Do literature searches to discover the relevant theories and theorists. Pay particular attention to the footnotes/endnotes to discover what studies are repeatedly referenced. You may discover that a study that does not end up in your review still provides an excellent resource in discovering what literature that author believed to be relevant to the topic at hand.

5. The reviewer should select the appropriate strategy of **ordering**. Next, they should write suggestive headings if there will be more than one division in the review. The key names and parenthetical literature date for each theorist/theory to be explored in the section should be posted under the heading. Once the collection of names/thematics is selected, the student should then **order** the names by the selected ordering pattern to be used within the subdivision or the ordering pattern of the whole if there are no sub-divisions. Once the theorist names and thematic ideas are ordered in this fashion, the reviewer is ready to write.

6. Though it is customary to begin by noting the key theorists and their findings, it is poor form if every paragraph begins with the name of a new theorist. In writing a review of the literature, the writer must depict a synthetic story rather than a “connect-the-dots” picture. Organize the literature review by themes that permit you the writer to examine the interplay between various theorists or to examine the significance of trends relevant to the topic of your review. You must be selective, but the goal is to canvas the central ideas of the subject area. You must assess whether studies in a subject area make a contribution and should be included or are peripheral to the conversation. If you are not an expert, you are wise to include only those studies that are taken up and discussed by others. The exception would be if you have narrowed your subject area to a category in which only a few studies may be available.

7. Studies with similar findings, or that support a similar thesis of inquiry in a discipline will be noted together. Studies that differ with these findings should be noted. Since knowledge in a discipline grows through studied inquiry and through debate of the normative value of findings, a literature review must begin a simple summary of the existing normative assessment among accredited scholars and researchers of the selected topic and then tell the story of their debate and discussion as it is refining further knowledge in the area or is challenging existing knowledge with new models.

8. It is important that the reviewer adopt an appropriate **Voice** in conducting the review process. **See above.**

9. At then end of any section, be sure to write a summary transition to assist readers to see how the assessment connects with the problematic that you have identified in the rationale. Make sure that the review presents a coherent story and that any gaps are identified.

10. *When a final draft is in place, the real work can begin.* Now write the introduction to the review, or re-edit what you have written to refine it in light of what you have produced. Also refine the summary-transition sections to tighten up the coherence of the story your literature review tells for listeners. Do not be ambiguous. Help readers to understand what you believe should be derived from your assessment of the literature. Edit the whole for continuity. Eliminate thematics or theories/theroists that are not relevant to the final story you tell.
Reviewing the Process Tips

The following is a useful set of tips on writing the literature review by Dena Taylor, Director, Health Sciences Writing Centre, and Margaret Procter, Coordinator, Writing Support, University of Toronto.

In beginning the literature review ask questions like:

1. What is the specific thesis, problem, or research question that my literature review helps to define?
2. What type of literature review am I conducting? Am I looking at issues of theory, methodology, policy, qualitative research (e.g., on the effectiveness of a new procedure), quantitative research (e.g., studies)?
3. What is the scope of my literature review? What types of publications am I using (e.g., journals, books, government documents, popular media)? What discipline am I working in (e.g., nursing psychology, sociology, medicine)?

In evaluating the quality of your finished literature review ask questions like:

1. How good was my information seeking? Has my search been wide enough to ensure I've found all the relevant material? Has it been narrow enough to exclude irrelevant material? Is the number of sources I've used appropriate for the length of my paper?
2. Have I critically analyzed the literature I use? Do I follow through a set of concepts and questions, comparing items to each other in the ways they deal with them? Instead of just listing and summarizing items, do I assess them, discussing strengths and weaknesses?
3. Have I cited and discussed studies contrary to my perspective?
4. Will the reader find my literature review relevant, appropriate, and useful?

Ask yourself questions like these about each book or article you include:

1. Has the author formulated a problem/issue?
2. Is it clearly defined? Is its significance (scope, severity, relevance) clearly established?
3. Could the problem have been approached more effectively from another perspective?
4. What is the author's research orientation (e.g., interpretive, critical science, combination)?
5. What is the author's theoretical framework (e.g., psychological, developmental, feminist)?
6. What is the relationship between the theoretical and research perspectives?
7. Has the author evaluated the literature relevant to the problem/issue? Does the author include literature taking positions she or he does not agree with?
8. In a research study, how good are the basic components of the study design (e.g., population, intervention, outcome)? How accurate and valid are the measurements? Is the analysis of the data accurate and relevant to the research question? Are the conclusions validly based upon the data and analysis?

http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/litrev.html
9. In material written for a popular readership, does the author use appeals to emotion, one-sided examples, or rhetorically-charged language and tone? Is there an objective basis to the reasoning, or is the author merely "proving" what he or she already believes?

10. How does the author structure the argument? Can you "deconstruct" the flow of the argument to see whether or where it breaks down logically (e.g., in establishing cause-effect relationships)?

11. In what ways does this book or article contribute to our understanding of the problem under study, and in what ways is it useful for practice? What are the strengths and limitations?

12. How does this book or article relate to the specific thesis or question I am developing?