

Writing a Literature Review Handout 1

What is a literature review?

A literature review is a key component of most academic papers. Some assignments will ask you to provide a separate literature review section, while other assignments will require you to weave a review of important literature on a topic into the introduction or body section of your paper. A literature review should offer an overview of the relevant and significant literature on a research area. It is usually carefully limited to a particular problem, issue or timeframe and should include a description, summary and critical evaluation of the scholarship and research studies you choose to discuss.

What a literature review is not:

A literature review is **not simply a list** describing or summarising one piece of literature after another.

What is the purpose of a literature review?

The purpose of a literature review is to convey to your reader a sense of what knowledge and ideas have already been established on a topic, and what the strengths and weaknesses of these contributions are. As a piece of writing, the literature review must be defined by a guiding concept (e.g. your research objective for your own research project, the main problem or issue you are discussing, or the major argument you are exploring). A literature review should show the reader your ability to identify the relevant information and outline existing knowledge on a topic, and to identify the 'gap' in the research that your paper or research project will address. The literature review should provide a rationale or justification for your argument or study.

The function of a literature review, therefore, is to:

- demonstrate to your reader your understanding and awareness of current research in the area,
- locate your own research within the context of current research and theory,
- demonstrate your capacity to critically evaluate the research of others,
- indicate how your own scholarship and research builds on what is already known in the area.

There is no single correct method for writing a literature review. How you write your literature review will depend on your particular topic, the writing conventions of your degree discipline, and your level or year of study. **Be sure to check with your department and your supervisor/tutor for the particular requirements appropriate to your discipline and topic.**

What counts as 'literature'?

'Literature' covers all relevant and authoritative scholarship and research on a topic. 'Literature' includes scholarly arguments and research studies discussed in books, journal articles, historical records, government reports, etc., and on scholarly or professional websites. **Check with your supervisor or tutor when in doubt of the validity of a research source.**

Why write a literature review?

Completing a literature review brings you up to date with the current extent of knowledge and ideas—including contrasting debates, approaches, methodologies, perspectives and viewpoints—that exist on a topic. A well-researched and well-written literature review provides your reader with this knowledge and demonstrates to your reader that you are in command of your subject knowledge. A literature review also provides you with a backdrop from which to define and defend the topic you are discussing, by requiring you to explain how your own research fits into the 'the bigger picture' and to justify your own approach to the topic.

Undergraduate literature reviews

A literature review is an essential part of undergraduate dissertations, project reports and long essays, particularly in the final year. At undergraduate level, a literature review is expected to:

- offer an accurate account of the key points, methodologies and conclusions of current research on your topic,
- demonstrate your awareness and understanding of the main theoretical approaches and how they relate to your topic,
- justify why you are taking a particular approach to your chosen topic and possibly to show how your approach adds something that is not already known or understood within the area.

Masters literature reviews

A literature review is an integral component of Masters essays, reports, and dissertations. At Masters level, a literature review will take a substantial amount of time and effort to produce and may, in itself, represent a useful piece of scholarship. A Masters level literature review is expected to:

- offer a coherent, analytical account of the current state of research in the area that evaluates the relative strengths and weaknesses of various theories and approaches,
- discuss the advantages/disadvantages of various research methodologies that scholars have applied in the area,
- provide a reflective consideration of your own methodological criteria,
- reflect critically upon the assumptions, implications and premises associated with the relevant theoretical approaches adopted by other scholars and by yourself.

Doctoral literature reviews

At the Doctoral level a literature review is expected to be written to a very high standard. It will take a considerable amount of time and effort to produce and will in itself be a definitive piece of scholarship. The literature review you write for your doctoral thesis will be read by experts in your field, and must, therefore, show that you have knowledge of the field in terms of both depth and breadth. A Doctoral literature review is expected to:

- go beyond recording and evaluating the research of others, to infer the possibility of further potential research approaches to the topic or problem,
- demonstrate a high level of conceptual understanding within and across theories,
- demonstrate your capacity to provide an evaluative account of the historical development of scholarship which has led to the current state of research in your field,
- show that you are an authority on the current state of research in your area, wherever it is published and in whatever language it appears. Ignorance of a significant piece of research may cast doubt upon your entire research project. For this reason, the writing of your doctoral literature review must be an evolving, on-going process, which involves adding to and refining your document throughout your doctoral study,

List of References

Hart, C. (1998) *Doing a Literature Review: Releasing the Social Science Imagination*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan: 14-25

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