



# Literature Review

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*A literature review should contain an introduction, body, and conclusion.*

## Introduction

- Define the topic.
- Establish reasons for the review and criteria used to analyze and compare the literature.
- Explain the organization of the review.
- State what literature is and is not included.
- Point out overall trends, conflicts, and gaps in research and scholarship.

## Writing a Literature Review

It is easy to write a bad literature review and difficult to write a good one if you are not well prepared. To ensure you write a good literature review:

### ❖ Remember the Purpose

- It is not a descriptive list of the information gathered.
- It is not a summary of one piece of literature after another.
- It must be defined by a guiding concept. This statement will argue for a particular perspective on the material (e.g., *The current trend in treatment for congestive heart failure combines surgery and medicine.*)
- Your purpose is to convey to the reader what knowledge and ideas have been established on a topic – what are the strengths and weaknesses.
- Organize the information gathered into sections that present themes.
- Do not attempt to list all published material, but rather synthesize and evaluate the literature according to your guiding concept.

### ❖ Read with a Purpose

- Summarize the work you read
- Decide which ideas or information are important (so you can emphasize them.)
- Decide which ideas or information are less important and can be covered briefly or left out of the review.
- Look for major concepts, conclusions, theories, arguments, etc. that underlie the work.
- Look for similarities and differences with closely related work.

### ❖ Write with a Purpose

- Your aim is to evaluate and show relationships between the work already done and between this work and your own.
- Carefully plan how you are going to organize your work.

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## Reading For A Literature Review

When you read for your literature review, you are actually doing two things at the same time (which makes things more difficult):

1. You are trying to define your research problems: finding gaps, asking questions, continuing previous research, and counter-claiming;
2. You are trying to read every source **relevant** to your research.

Naturally, until you have defined your research topic or question, you will find that there are hundreds of sources that seem relevant. Many times you can't define your problem until you read articles, reports, and books in your research area. This seems a vicious circle, but what should happen is that *as you read you define your research topic (guiding concept), and as you define your research topic you will more easily be able to decide what to read and what to ignore.*

## Body

- **Group literature according to common themes.**
- **Proceed from the general, wider view to the specific problem.**
- **Summarize individual articles with as much or as little detail as each merits.** (Remember that space (length) denotes significance.)

## Conclusion

- **Summarize major contributions of the literature, maintaining the focus of the review.**
- **Evaluate the current “state of the art” for the body of knowledge reviewed, pointing out flaws, gaps, inconsistencies, and areas of future study.**
- **Conclude by providing insight into the relationship between the topic and the larger area of study.**

# Beginning the Composition

There are a few guidelines you should follow during the writing stage.

- *Use evidence.* Your interpretation of the available sources must be backed up with evidence to show that what you are saying is valid.
- *Be selective.* Select only the most important points in each source to highlight in the review. The type of information you choose to mention should relate directly to the review's focus.
- *Use quotes sparingly.* The survey nature of the review doesn't allow for an in-depth discussion or detailed quotes. Some short quotes here and there are okay, for example, if you want to emphasize a point, or if what the author said just can't be rewritten in your own words.
- *Summarize and synthesize.* Remember to summarize and synthesize your resources within each paragraph as well as throughout the review.
- *Keep your own voice.* While the literature review presents others' ideas, your voice (the writer's) should remain front and center.
- *Use caution when paraphrasing.* When paraphrasing a source that is not our own, be sure to represent the author's information or opinions accurately and in your own words.

## Traps To Avoid



### Trying to Read Everything

If you try to be comprehensive you will never be able to finish the reading! The idea of the literature review is not to provide a summary of all the published work that relates to your research, but a survey of the most relevant and significant work.

### Reading But Not Writing

It's easier to read than to write: given the choice, most of us would rather sit down with a cup of coffee and read yet another article instead of putting ourselves in front of the computer to write about what we have already read! Writing takes much more effort. However, writing can help you to understand and find relationships between the work you've read, so don't put writing off until you've "finished" reading – after all, you will probably still be doing some reading all the way through to the end of your research project. Also, don't think of what you first write as being the final or near-final version. Writing is a way of thinking, so allow yourself to write as many drafts as you need, changing your ideas and information as you learn more about the context of your research problem.

### Not Keeping Bibliographic Information

The moment will come when you have to write your reference page; then you realize you forgot to keep the information you need, and you never got around to putting references into your work. The only solution is to spend a lot of time tracking down all the sources you read, and going through your writing to find which information came from which source. To avoid this nightmare, always keep this information in your notes and always put references into your writing. Think about using a bibliography software program such as EndNote<sup>®</sup>; it will make this task much easier.