

HOW TO WRITE A LITERATURE REVIEW

As its name suggests, a literature review is where you read and review a range of sources relevant to your particular research. Reviewing previous studies provides you and your reader with an overview of what's already known. They can be a standalone piece, part of a research proposal, or a chapter in a report or thesis, playing a particularly important role in the introduction, research question(s), methodology, discussion and conclusion – so, in essence, the whole thing!

The format of a literature review will vary depending on your discipline. However, there are a number of elements that are essential, no matter what topic you're tackling.

■ The underlying purposes

There are a number of reasons behind writing a literature review:

- ▶ to place your research within the wider context of what's already known
- ▶ to compare and contrast studies on the same topic
- ▶ to bring to light different ways in which certain research can be interpreted
- ▶ to reveal knowledge gaps and where there's a need for additional research

■ The main stages

There are four main stages to writing a literature review:

- ▶ formulating the problem you're going to address
- ▶ searching for the relevant literature
- ▶ evaluating which sources are most significant
- ▶ analyzing the sources in regard to your own findings

■ Organization

A literature review is composed of four main parts:

- ▶ First of all you should provide an introduction, giving an overview of what it is you'll be focusing on and what your main objectives are.
- ▶ You'll then need to logically group your sources in regard to particular themes or categories. What a literature review is *not* is simply a description of as many sources as you could find on your topic. The themes you decide on should be connected to your main research question(s).
- ▶ Compare and contrast the sources, analyzing how they're different and the same.
- ▶ Conclude using those sources which contribute most to your area of research in regard to their arguments and opinions.

■ Writing tips

While writing your literature review, there are a number of points worth bearing in mind:

- ▶ **Be selective:** this refers not only to the sources you use, but also to what you take from each source. You should always keep your research question(s) in mind.
- ▶ **Don't be biased:** it's important to include ideas that don't concur with your own in order to strengthen your arguments.
- ▶ **Don't use too many quotations:** quoting directly when a point has been made too eloquently to be paraphrased can be very effective in writing. However, don't quote so often that your own summary and analysis is lost.
- ▶ **Relate back to your own research:** it's important to summarize sources, but it's also important to synthesize important elements of these summaries to ensure that the relevance is made clear.
- ▶ **Keep your own voice at the forefront:** a literature review is predominantly discussing the work of other people, but it shouldn't be at the cost of your own. Each time you discuss a source, make sure that your own ideas are present, either before, after or both.

■ Additional guidance

Help on how to look for sources can be found in “**Sourcing academic materials**” in this series. For assistance with referencing and paraphrasing, check out “**How to reference**” in this series.