

STEPS FOR WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Do a literature search

Find out what has been written about your topic. A good starting point is the list of references or bibliography of a recent article or book on the topic. Then use other bibliographical sources including abstracts, electronic data bases and the Internet. If you decide that a text is relevant, write down the bibliographical details in full—as the item would appear in your list of references or bibliography. Personal bibliographic software such as EndNote, is an extremely useful tool for tracking reading, organizing references and automatically generating reference lists.

2. Find the literature

You may want to spend some time working in a library which has more comprehensive holdings, or you might be able to use inter-library loans, or you may look into online scholarly databases.

3. Read the literature

Record the author and the title (you already have the other bibliographical information) and take notes. Your aim is to determine how the topic is approached and what is said about it. As you make notes, ask yourself the following questions about each text.

- What sort of text is it?
- What is the methodology?
- Is a particular approach or school followed?
- What are the definitions used?
- What is the theoretical basis?
- What evidence is used to back up the thesis?
- What are the conclusions?

4. Write short summaries

For each relevant text, try to write a one paragraph summary similar to an abstract.

5. Organize the summaries

Try to identify similarities and group the summaries accordingly. The headings under which the summaries are grouped will vary, depending on the topic and the subject.

6. Write each section

Each section of your literature review should deal with a specific aspect of the literature. Organize the literature around findings, ideas or themes rather than studies or authors. An effective literature review **CONNECTS** studies rather than talks about individual studies in isolation. Literature reviews are not annotated bibliographies: they **should not have one paragraph per source**. In general, the topic sentences in a literature review should illustrate connections across multiple studies, showing agreements, disagreements, or understudied areas. Below are some common

phrases for connecting studies by showing agreement and disagreement. Use the following phrases to highlight **agreement**:

- “There is strong convergent evidence for....”
- “Research seems to agree that....”
- “X lends support to Y’s finding....”
- “We find support for this hypothesis/theory in....”

Or **disagreement**:

- “The evidence on X is mixed....”
- “There is debate over....”
- “In contrast to X, Y found...”
- “There are two camps....”

7. Decide on the order of presentation

In most cases, this would be from most important to least important, and / or from established to more controversial theories, and / or from specific from tertiary sources (textbooks) to secondary sources (reviews of research) to primary sources (journal articles documenting original research).

8. Write the conclusion

The conclusion should include a summary of major agreements and disagreements in the literature and a summary of the general conclusions drawn. If the literature review is part of a dissertation or thesis, you should also indicate your own area of research. This might involve identifying a gap in the previous research, identifying problems with the previous research or proposing to extend previous knowledge.

9. Write the introduction

The introduction should include a clear statement of the topic and its parameters. You should indicate why the research area is important, interesting, problematic or relevant in some way.

10. Proofread and edit carefully

The literature review is an important part of a dissertation or thesis. It should be thorough and accurate.

What you have to avoid:

- your literature review is simply an annotated list of sources (or list of summaries)
- there is no discussion on how the literature compares (e.g. agreements or disagreements)
- there is too much material that is not relevant to your study
- the literature is simply described, not discussed
- the link between the literature and your research is not clear
- the literature is too old
- only one view is considered and the Literature Review is therefore biased
- some key sources are missing