Getting started with literature reviews

# Introduction

In this guide, we will guide you through what a literature review is and its **components**. We will also look at how to start **planning** and **preparing** your literature review.

## The purpose of a literature review

Liteature reviews are often part of a larger piece of academic writing (for example, a chapter in a dissertation) but can also be discrete, standalone pieces of research (such as review articles in academic journals).

The aim of a literatur review is to identify any gaps that your research will attempt to address, to assist in the development of your enquiry and to give the reader a better understanding of the subject.

## What does a literature review include?

## Part of a literature review

* To set the scene and provide the context for your research in terms of the content and methodology.
* To identify significant pieces of research on a topic.
* To identify any possible gaps in the research and to justify your own enquiry.
* To acknowledge the relevant work that has been done by others in the field.
* To identify the terminology and methodology associated with the research.

## Not part of a literature review

* Listing everything that has been published on a topic.
* To publish the findings of your own research.
* To criticise other scholars writing on the subject
* To explain the methodology of your approach.

## What is a good literature review?

A good literature review acknowledges the work that has been done by others. It identifies significant research, theories and differeing opinions of the key authors in the research field, and the gaps in the research, relating your research to previous studies that have taken place.

A literature review also sets the scene and context for your research in terms of the content and the methods. You can relate that directly to the research question and your research area of enquiry within your discipline.

A literature review is not where you will identify the results of your own research. It is also not where you will reveal the findings and conclusions of your research. It is where you will be setting out what you’re about to explore. It is where your research can set itself up as part of being a body of knowledge and a conversation with all the other pieces of research.

Your literature review should acknowledge that there can often be differences of opinion and theories from different authors. You should include both sides of that discussion. Your literature reivew should be a synthesis of all the pieces of researchtaht have been done, that relate to your research question. Ultimately, your enquiry, your results, and your conclusion will become part of that body of literature.

## The components of a literature review

* **Seminal literature**

It is important that your review includes the litearture that has set the foundations of the thoeries of methodologies related to your review.

* **Relevant literature**

Your review should contain references to the literature that has assisted you on your journey in your enquiry. The literature that you select should meet the purposes of the review as defined earlier.

* **Defined scope of review**

Your review should include the parameters you will be working within.

This would include thinking about the years that you might eb searching across and how you will search.

It should also include the reasoning as to why you have made these decisions.

* **Key debates**

Your review should be objective. It needs to include the details of the debates and the challenges that exist in your field of enquiry, as have been highlighted by researchers in the field.

* **Key authors**

Comparing and contrasting the views of different authors on the topic will bring discussion into your review. You can group authors who draw similar conclusions into your writing to set the contexts for your research and opinions so you become a part of the wider discussion.

* **Synthesised themes**

Your literature review should indicate the common themes that you have identified during the review.

* **Major/key debates**

Highlight the areas in which the key authors are in disagreement and oppose each other. This can often lead to a space where there is room for you to add your voice to the discussion.

* **Summary of known/unknown**

There should be a summary to conclude your review. This should include what is known from the literature and what is not known. This is vital if the litearture is part of a bigger piece of work such as a dissertation.

# Preparing for your literature review

## Skills demonstrated

Your review overall will demonstrate a range of skills to your examiner and these are worth bearing in mind when you are writing up your review. Do you recognise them?

* Synthesis of literature
* Effective searching skills
* Critical thinking
* Evaluation of research methods
* Awareness of field including the history, terminology, and debates
* Referencing

## Planning and preparing

The basis for a solid literature review is your literature search. Through reading and understanding your subject area you should be able to ask questions about what you have learnt. Further questions will drive towards new data and knowledge as you begin to draw connections and patterns from what you have read.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### How long will it take?

This depends on the topic, but a good literature review needs adequate time to carry out a thorough literature search and to read and evaluate the material. You may also need to obtain material that is not available in the Library and this can take a while.

### Where do I start looking?

Your course leader, supervisor, or tutor may be able to give you some initial pointers in terms of significant wrwiters and key publications ona topic. You can talk to a librarian who will eb abel to gtive you some helpful pointers and guide you to the best subject resources. You will find more information about how to do this at the end of this guide.

Textbooks can be useful in setting out the key themes in a subject area and will usually include a list of references for further reading. Academic journals often include review articles that summarise the significant research in a specific topic. Subject databases will usually allow you to limit yoru search to ‘review articles’. These will help you to identify some of the main research in your subject area.

### What should it include?

Literature reviews are about the academic context of a subject. As such they would usually focus on published works of an academic nature. Your review should provide a balanced, synthesised account of the relvant works in which you demonstrate that you have understood the existing research on a topic and are clearly able tos et your own ideas within this wider context.

The literature review would not usually include unpublished research findings, primary source material you intend to use in your own research, secondary sources that are not of an academic quality. These may be valid and useful in yoru own investigation but would appear elsewhere in yoru thesis, not in the review.

### When do I stop looking?

As you read around a subject, keeping in mind your own research topic and areas to explore, you should start to forma mental picture of the existing landscape. You will need to discuss ideas, writers, and sources that illustrate and identify the key themes, but it is not necessary to detail every piece of work on a subject.

Once you have established the context for you own research and introduced the ideas you think are relevant, you can move on.

### How can I link together emergining arguments?

When writing your literature review remember not to just describe what one writer says, and then go on to give a general overview of another writing, and then another, and so on. Grouping together key authors and research will help you wil this along with linking words.

When grouping together writers with similar opinions, try using words or phrases such as: similarly, in addition, also, again.

If there is disagreement, you need to show your awareness of this clearly by using linking words and phrases such as: however, on the other hand, conversely, nevertheless.

You will find more helpful information at the end of this guide.

### Where can I go for more help?

Your course leader, supervisor, or tutor should be the first person you ask for help if you are unclear about your dissertation or thesis. If you need help in terms of identifying relevant sources of information, searching for literature, or managing your search results, or you would like to develop your academic writing skills, you can contact the Library.

# Summary

Writing your literature review will be a constantly developing process. You cannot do all yoru reading and research before writing as it is often not until you start explaining a point in writing that you find where your argument is weak, and you need to collect more evidence.

It is worth beginning to write your review once you are part of the way through your reading, reviewing and rewriting as you go.

Reading anythign on your research area is a good start. As you continue you can make decision about where to focus your reading.