

## Writing and planning a literature review

### What is a literature review?

A literature review may be provided as a standalone document or part of a larger research project, such as a thesis.

A standalone (sometimes called 'simple') literature review is designed to demonstrate that you have widely researched your field and you understand the main arguments. Where your literature review is part of a thesis, it should support to define your research project / specific research topic by establishing how your work will extend or differ from previous work and provide a 'significant contribution' to knowledge in your area, or to professional practice.

Therefore, ensure that you understand the type of literature review you are expected to write by reviewing your unit content, assessment task and assessment rubric and clarifying with your lecturer / tutor.

### Purpose

Although a literature review should demonstrate your overall understanding of the literature, this shouldn't just list and summarise the information. Instead, it should develop an argument, and lead to identification of a 'research gap' that justifies a novel research question. For a literature review relating to a thesis, you are usually expected to determine the purpose of a literature review yourself.

A literature review provides a comprehensive review of the literature in a specific area of interest. It enables you to:

- To define or develop the research question (Burns & Grove, 2001).
- Identify an appropriate method of data collection (Burns & Grove, 2001).
- Identify gaps in the literature pertaining to the problem (Burns & Grove, 2001).
- Make recommendations how those gaps may be addressed (Burns & Grove, 2001).
- Demonstration of appropriate depth and breadth of literature relating to your area of research focus. Studies should be relatively contemporary, being less than five years old (Burns & Grove, 2001).
- However, exceptions may include seminal (original) studies, findings, theories that are still relevant to current practice. Additionally, some historical as well as contemporary material may be required to provide adequate context for the area being studied (Burns & Grove, 2001).

### Planning for the literature review

First you need to ascertain whether you are undertaking a **standalone / 'simple' literature review**, or an **academic literature review**. For an academic literature review, a literature review sets the context for your ongoing research project and provides the framework for interpreting your findings and results.

Although your review needs to 'tell a story', it can't be written in a meandering fashion like a novel but needs to incorporate a balanced approach that incorporates the appropriate style for an academic report or thesis. The literature review should provide a clear and logical overview of your research area to add credibility as a scholarly work. Like an essay, it should have an introduction, body and conclusion and may include appropriate sections and sub-sections, that includes clear linkages and explanations of the elements you are including and why.

Although you need to demonstrate that you have read widely, and understand the key themes in your field, nevertheless it is not possible or advisable to try and read all the content ever written in your field. Rather, you should be selective. As far as possible try and include only academic sources, such as peer reviewed journal articles and textbooks. Your aim is to include the most essential information pertaining to your thesis topic through the lens of well-considered contemporary and seminal literature as it relates to your topic. Seminal means the original source for key principles, definitions, models and theoretical constructs in your field. They are using 'landmark', or 'ground-breaking' studies, that are influential and highly cited works. Additional sources should be relatively contemporary (i.e., within the last five years where possible). All chosen literature should always relate clearly to your own research / question and be relevant to your argument.

## Analysis

In order for your writing to reflect strong critical analysis, you need to evaluate the sources. For each source you are reviewing ask yourself these questions:

- How authoritative and credible is this source?
- What are the key terms and concepts?
- How relevant is this article to my specific topic?
- What are the major relationships, trends and patterns?
- What is the author's central argument?
- What are the differences and similarities between the sources?
- What are the gaps in the literature that justify further research?

Identify gaps in the literature. The literature review should identify for the reader what is inherent and important in the literature, and what is missing in the existing literature. These are the 'gaps' in the literature and existing knowledge, which, if you are undertaking a thesis, justifies your research and investigation (Cryer, 2006).

## How to write the literature review

Note that there are actually many types of literature review (e.g. simple, applied & academic), therefore it is important for you to consult and carefully consider your assessment requirements, task details and marking rubric to ensure that you are following the specific requirements for your particular discipline. Where you are required to identify your own topic, before writing your literature review it is important to check that your research topic has been narrowly defined to the extent that you can focus your literature research and subsequent analysis and writing. You need to create realistic limits to the topic you study so you do not lose focus and become overwhelmed with the process, whilst still ensuring that you conduct a thorough enough literature review to demonstrate a credible understanding of your topic.

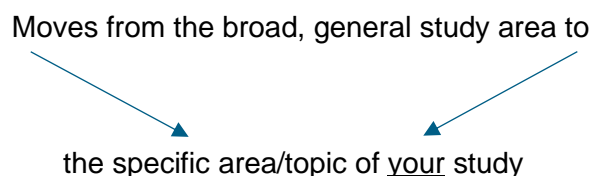
One method that may assist with narrowing your research focus is to consider the elements of Time, Location, Category & Issue (or perspective). View the following video for an example of how each element may be applied to assist with narrowing your research focus (U of G Library, 2018).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rpCbSjldXIM>

Four Steps to Narrow your Research Focus

As discussed, preparing a literature review typically involves critically evaluating each piece of literature before writing your review. You then put together the ideas (critically discuss the ideas, do not just list them) to give a cohesive overview of what you have found. Demonstrating your knowledge of the field of study is an essential part of a literature review; therefore, demonstrating breadth and depth of references is extremely important.

After you have critically read and summarised each article, think about organising the ideas so that you identify the broad subject area, give an overview of the 'big picture' to date, and then get more specific with the relevant details of what you have found in the literature, for example the views/theories about this topic area and the findings from previous studies. You do this to set the context for your particular topic/research area. This enables the reader to see how your study/topic area 'fits' into, or follows on from previous research.



It is important to realise that writing a good literature review takes a lot of time and effort and may require several edits. The following section outlines some common structures used for literature reviews.

## Common literature review structures

### *Academic literature review*

Note that for an **'academic' literature review** (i.e., a literature review that is written as a chapter within the thesis), the structure is typically straight forward as the literature review supports the other elements of the thesis. In this context, generally the structure will only require an introduction, body paragraphs and conclusion. You may also include various headings and subheadings as they relate to the topic area. These elements should contain the following information:

#### **Introduction**

Your introduction should explain:

- why the topic is important
- the scope of the review – the depth and breadth of the research area/ topic
- the criteria informing your literature selection (e.g. type of sources used, date range)
- how the review is organised.

#### **Body paragraphs**

Each body paragraph should introduce / discuss a different theme relating to your topic area. Make sure that you synthesise several reviewed readings into each paragraph, to demonstrate a clear connection between the chosen sources. Importantly, make sure that you critically analyse each source and ensure that they contribute to the themes you are researching.

The body may include synthesised paragraphs relating to:

- historical / chronological events significantly influencing the field / topic
- methodologies
- previous studies related to your topic
- conventional 'mainstream' beliefs and concepts versus alternative theories / findings
- focus on the principal research questions being asked

#### **Conclusion**

Your conclusion should give a summary of:

- the main storyline or narrative in the literature including principal areas of agreements and disagreements in the literature
- identified gaps or areas that justify further research
- identification of importance of the topic and significance of potential future research

#### **Checklist**

Check that you have:

- outlined the purpose and scope?
- incorporated appropriate and credible (academic/scholarly) literature?
- Correctly referenced all sources in text and in your end references?
- analysed and critiqued the literature?
- identified gaps in the literature?
- explored methodologies / theories / hypotheses / models?
- Contrasted and discussed varying viewpoints?
- Identified the importance of the research topic
- Identified potential future research areas, and the significance of the research?
- written an introduction, body and conclusion?
- checked punctuation and spelling?

### *Standalone literature review structure*

Note that for an **'standalone' literature review** you may be asked to incorporate other elements. Check your unit contents, assessment task, rubric and with your lecturer / tutor for exact requirements, however the following may be required:

#### **Title**

The title should be between 10 and 15 words long and should clearly identify for the reader the purpose of the study. Titles that are too long or too short can be confusing or misleading (Parahoo, 2006).

## Abstract

The abstract is a summary of the literature review. The abstract provides a summary sentence from each section. Complete the abstract after the literature review is written.

## Introduction

Include the purpose of the literature review, and a logical sequence of the development of your sections i.e. the **themes/ideas/concepts/issues** in order. You may include background and short definitions, scope or limitations. Use the marking rubric/criteria to check that you are covering all that is required in the task.

## Findings

Divide the findings into specific areas under investigation or the major sections of your literature review. It may be **themes/ideas/concepts/issues**. Use **headings and subheadings to logically structure** your response and **synthesise an overview** of your topic in a reasoned and integrated argument. You should be able to identify major points that you want to convey to the reader. Make sure your paragraphs are in a logical order. Use paragraph structure (topic sentence, referenced evidence from the literature to support and evaluate your argument and concluding or linking sentences) to **critically analyse and evaluate or make judgments** about the literature. The structure will vary depending on the topic and the instructions. In some literature reviews you may present some aspects chronologically. For others, you may present background information with definitions and then analyse two or three case studies in detail. Then you may draw conclusions using the case studies as evidence for the argument that you are presenting to the reader. Always keep the focus of the review in mind, follow the task details and the marking rubric provided.

## Conclusion

Summary of the major points made, to provide an overview of the literature. Recommendations can be included in a separate section.

## Reference List

All material referred to in the literature review **must** be listed in alphabetical order on a separate page using the referencing style prescribed by the Unit Assessor or school.

**NOTE:** The references list should **only** contain works that are cited in the literature review.

## Questions to ask to help you organise your ideas

### *In the abstract:*

- Could someone understand the literature review just from reading the abstract?
- Is this an accurate one sentence summary for each section in your literature review?

### *In the introductory section:*

- What is the general subject area under review?
- What concepts/theories underlying the topic needs defining?
- What are the main themes/ideas/concepts/issues under investigation?
- Is there an overall view e.g. is there a general consensus or is there a variety of views?

### *In the findings/body section:*

- Which writers write about the same ideas?
- How do these ideas fit into the bigger picture?
- What are the main themes/ideas/concepts/issues?
- How are writers' work similar/different?
- Are there areas of agreement/disagreement?
- Are there any limitations in the literature/studies?

### *In the concluding section:*

- What is my final summary of the review?
- Is there a gap in the existing knowledge?
- How does my proposed study relate to these findings (if applicable)?
- How will I conduct my investigation (if applicable)? This question will lead you into deciding how you will gather information for your study.

- Why will I use this method of investigation and not some other? This question will lead you to justify your methodology (if applicable).

**Make sure you:**

- organise your review according to themes/ideas/concepts/issues
- structure your themes/ideas/concepts/issues with heading and subheadings
- be analytical and critical not just descriptive
- try to avoid just listing authors' ideas. Which authors agree, disagree, develop an argument further?
- write, edit and redraft to help clarify your themes/ideas/concepts/issues.

The following section identifies a visual mapping sequence that may assist you to structure and write your literature review. Additionally, examples are provided of several methods that you may use to incorporate citations.

# Planning your literature review: Visual mapping

TITLE

Keep the title to a few major words. This acts to remind you of the particular focus of your Literature Review.

ABSTRACT (Word count)

A summary sentence from each section. Complete this last. Use appropriate format.

INTRODUCTION (Word count)

Include the importance and relevance of the topic, logical plan of the development of your argument/ ideas/sections<sup>(1234)</sup> in order and the context. Include background and short definitions, scope or limitations. Include the **aim or purpose of your Literature Review**.

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These boxes represent the specific areas under investigation, or the major themes/sections of your literature review. Use headings and subheadings to **logically structure and organise** your reasoned and integrated argument by **locating, identifying and critically assessing knowledge** of the discipline. Identify and clarify themes/ideas/concepts/issues.

Use paragraph structure (topic sentence, referenced evidence from the literature to support and evaluate your argument and concluding or linking sentence) to **critically assess, evaluate and synthesise information** from the literature. The dot points underneath the boxes could represent the major points for each new paragraph, in logical order.

The lines underneath can be used to list specific authors that you will reference for that issue and identify where further research is required. Numbers can be assigned to indicate the order of your sections once you decide what is most important to your argument. You can decide on approximate word counts for each section.

Finally, check back to the assessment task detail and the marking rubric to ensure all sections of your task are covered.

Summary of the major points made, to provide an overview of the literature. Recommendations and any identified gaps in the literature can be included.

Provide an alphabetically ordered list of references on a separate page using the appropriate style (e.g. APA 7<sup>th</sup>). Select current, relevant peer reviewed journals and books to show breadth and depth of your research.

BODY (Word count)

(Word count)

MAJOR ISSUE 1

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MAJOR ISSUE 2

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(Word count)

(Word count)

MAJOR ISSUE 3

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MAJOR ISSUE 4

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CONCLUSION (Word count)

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REFERENCE LIST

Provide an alphabetically ordered list of references on a separate page using the referencing system designated by your lecturer (eg APA, Harvard, etc.).

## Methods to incorporate citations:

### To include another person's ideas:

Brown (2003) claims that... argues that... points out that... reports that... proposes that... suggests that... states that... maintains that... implies that...

### To make comments about individual studies:

The study comprised/consisted of ... focused on... has undertaken/attempted...

The findings were reported as... Brown's (2001) study has shown that/found that...

Jones (1999) has indicated that... develops a theoretical perspective that...

...is part of a growing body of work that... redefines the traditional notion/idea of...

...elaborates on the theory that... has undertaken/attempted a...

Brown (2001) raises... proposes... defends... substantiates... justifies the idea notion/proposition...

### To make comments about a number of studies:

Research (e.g., Brown, 2003; Smith, 2000) has shown that...

Studies (e.g., Brown, 2003; Smith, 2000) have indicated that...

Studies (e.g., Brown, 2003; Smith, 2000) generally agree/ confirm/disagree/refute...

There is a common view that... The general finding is that...

Traditional theories/ ideas are reworked as...

### To give your opinion when you are making a suggestion:

Brown's (2003) claim seems to be that... suggests that... could be interpreted as... appears as though... It would seem that further investigations are needed to...

### To make comparisons between studies/ideas:

Whereas previous studies... this study seeks to... While this study... other studies...

Unlike previous studies, this study/article... concludes that...

Similarly, in comparison, in contrast, likewise, conversely, on the other hand, as was evidenced in previous studies, the findings/idea put forward in this study/article...

The research has tended to focus on... rather than on...

Although considerable research effort has been given to... less attention has been paid to.... These studies have emphasised... as opposed to...

### To make critical comments (strengths, weaknesses, limitations):

The study was well presented and documented... assumes that... is predicated on the assumption that... Other differences were noted... however...

Even so, many questions were left unanswered.

The problem with these studies... The study does not... There is some contradictory evidence...

The... were questionable/debatable... It is unclear how...

The limitations of the... There are concerns with the...

### Methods to introduce a new idea or topic (e.g. in an essay):

Recently there has been a strong interest in... The development of... is a problem...

The... has become a favoured topic because...

The central issue is...

The relationship between... and... has been investigated by...

Many studies have focused on...

## References

Cryer, P. (2006). *The research student's guide to success*. McGraw-Hill Education.

Burns, N., & Grove, S. K. (2001). *The Practice of Nursing Research: Conduct, Critique, and Utilization*. 3rd edn. WB Saunders Company.

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