

UNIVERSITY WRITING PROGRAM

WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review is a document or section of a document that collects key sources on a topic and discusses those sources in conversation with each other (also called synthesis). The lit review is an important genre in many disciplines, as it discusses the research (also called scholarship or literature) in a given field.

Where, when, and why would I write a lit review?

Different situations and disciplines each have different expectations for literature reviews. In the humanities, authors might include more overt argumentation and interpretation of source material, while in the sciences, authors are more likely to report study designs and results. Always get feedback from those knowledgeable in your field to be sure you understand your discipline's conventions for literature reviews.

A literature review can be a part of a research paper or scholarly article, usually coming just after the introduction. Such lit reviews only need to cover scholarship important to your topic, though it may also cover key sources that informed your research methodology.

Lit reviews can also be standalone pieces, either as class assignments or as publications. In a class, a lit review may help students familiarize themselves with a topic and its important scholars, find gaps in existing research, and/or develop frameworks and methodologies for later research. As a publication, a lit review can help other scholars—especially students and scholars entering a new research area—by collecting, summarizing, synthesizing, and analyzing existing research on a topic.

What are the parts of a lit review?

Most lit reviews use a basic introduction-body-conclusion structure; if your lit review is part of a larger paper, the introduction and conclusion pieces may be just a few sentences while you focus most of your attention on the body. If your lit review is a standalone piece, the introduction and conclusion take up more space and give you a separate place to discuss your goals, research methods, and conclusions.

Introduction:

- An introductory paragraph that explains your working topic and thesis
- A forecast of key topics or texts that will appear in the review
- Potentially, a description of how you found sources and how you analyzed them for inclusion and discussion in the review (more common in published, standalone literature reviews)

Body:

- Summarize and synthesize: Give an overview of the main points of each source and combine them into a coherent whole
- Analyze and interpret: Don't just paraphrase other researchers – add your own interpretations where possible, discussing the significance of findings in relation to the literature as a whole
- Critically evaluate: Mention the strengths and weaknesses of your sources
- Write in well-structured paragraphs: Use transition words and topic sentence to draw connections, comparisons, and contrasts.

Conclusion:

- Summarize the key findings you have taken from the literature and emphasize their significance
- Connect it back to your primary research question

How should I organize my lit review?

Lit reviews can take many different organizational structures depending on your goals. Here are just four examples:

- **Chronological:** The simplest approach is to trace the topic's development over time, which helps familiarize the audience with it. If you choose this strategy, be careful to avoid simply listing and summarizing sources in order. Try to analyze the patterns, turning points, and key debates that have shaped the field, and if appropriate in your discipline, give your interpretation of how and why certain developments occurred.
- **Thematic:** If you have found recurring themes that you will continue working with throughout your piece, you can organize your literature review into subsections that address different aspects of the topic. For example, if you are reviewing literature about women and religion, key themes can include the role of women in churches and religious attitudes towards women.
- **Methodological:** If you draw your sources from different disciplines or fields that use a variety of research methods, you can compare the results and conclusions that emerge from different approaches. For example:
 - Qualitative versus quantitative research
 - Empirical versus theoretical scholarship
 - Divide the research by sociological, historical, or cultural sources
- **Theoretical:** In many humanities articles, the literature review is the foundation for the theoretical framework. You can use it to discuss various theories, models, and definitions of key concepts. You can argue for the relevance of a specific theoretical approach or combine various theoretical concepts to create a framework for your research.

What strategies or tips can I use while writing my lit review?

- Research thoroughly and choose your sources wisely; your lit review is only as good as the research it discusses!
- Create an annotated bibliography (see our Annotated Bibliographies handout) as you research. The information in it will become a foundation for your lit review, while creating it will also help you develop a sense for the larger scholarly conversations in the field.
- Synthesize research rather than just summarizing it. This often means using multiple authors in each paragraph.
- Frame your lit review as an argument if possible and appropriate in your discipline. This will offer you a chance to position yourself in relation to other scholars, to define your intellectual lineage, and to argue for your place in the scholarly conversation.

Adapted from the Purdue OWL Guide, https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/conducting_research/writing_a_literature_review.html, 2020.

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