



How to Write a Lit Review

What is a Lit Review?

A literature review, often called a lit review, is an essay (or portion of an essay) that reviews and analyzes current writings/reports about a research topic. Often a lit review is done after creating an **annotated bibliography** where you collect sources, write notes, and then begin to compare and contrast them to each other. In an annotated bibliography, you can write opinions about sources which is helpful for writing argumentative papers and research essays. However, **lit reviews** do not make an argument or form opinions, but rather should simply be an exploration and evaluation of past research.

When Do I Need a Lit Review?

Lit reviews can either be their own essays or a portion of a research essay, master's thesis, or other large project. Professors can assign lit reviews, or you may feel that one is necessary to fully complete a project and add it as a section to your report or essay. They are most useful when you are conducting some form of research where there has been plenty of other research that you want to reference or compare to in your own work.

Steps to Writing a Lit Review

1. Define Scope of Research

Literature reviews add context and understanding to research projects, but in order to create a literature review you need to know the scope of your research. We cannot research everything so narrowing your topic can help maximize your time.

Example: If you are writing a research project on mental health programs and their effectiveness in schools, you may decide to focus only on high schools or universities.

Alternatively you may need to broaden your research if there is not enough previously done research studies for you to pull from.

Example: If you are writing a literature review essay about lo-fi music and how it affects studying results, you may not find enough previous research. In that case you could expand your topic to be about how instrumental music affects studying results.

A good test for your research is to consider how many subtopics you can write about your research questions. Will you have enough data and points to write your essay? Will you run out of pages before you can answer your research question? When thinking of the scope consider using the **funnel method** – a method where you consider the biggest scope (Ex: global mental health) and narrow it down to the smallest scope (Ex: adolescent depression in America) – to determine what area of research you would like to focus on.

2. Look For Sources

Depending on your topic you may wish to use certain types of sources for your research. Academic journals, peer-reviewed, articles are the most common for lit reviews, but you may find books, newspaper articles, or reputable websites to be useful for your work. Different reasons for study may change what is most helpful to you.

Example: If you are doing a thesis project on crime writing novellas and how they can be written most effectively, it may make more sense to research by reading crime novellas and analyzing the author's strategies than it does to read academic articles.

3. **Create a Notes Document or Annotated Bibliography**

Literature review assignments for undergraduates typically have between 5-15 sources while graduate-level literature reviews for projects or master's thesis work typically have 30 sources at least. Reading that much research is time-consuming and sometimes difficult to remember. As you read, take notes that include the name of the source, the author, and any possible quotes you may want to use. Another option is to create an annotated bibliography which includes the details above, along with your own analysis of the source.

4. **Structure Paragraphs**

Lit review paragraphs usually follow this structure:

- Begin with a small transition phrase before immediately jumping into the name of the source.
- Spend a sentence or two explaining how the research was done in the source
- Provide a synopsis of the source's findings.
 - Remember, you aren't building an argument here, you're just giving a summary of what was discovered.
- Point out any gaps in the research or limitations of the study/topic.
- Consider connecting the source to the source above it before ending the paragraph or transition into the next topic.

Organizing Your Review

Now that you know how to write a review, it's time to consider how to organize your lit review so that it makes the most sense to your reader. There are multiple methods you can use to organize a lit review depending on what's most important to your research topic.

Type	What it is	When to use
Chronological order	Sort your lit review entries by the date that they came out.	This is most useful when your research is going to later compare how a process or topic has developed over time or if your project revolves around historic events.
Topic	Sort based on different topics or subgenres your research	Most useful when you have multiple subgenres of study in your research. <i>Example: if you are covering mental health programs, you can place the programs that specifically studied depression together and then the programs that studied anxiety in another subgroup.</i>

Source format	Sort based on the format of your sources (ie. books, journals, articles)	Most useful when you need to make a distinction between source formatting. <i>Example: if you are doing a lit review for a masters project about film making, you may have a section of journal articles that analyze impacts of films and a section of screenplays that you're bringing into the project.</i>
Demographic/Method	Sort based on the methods used to conduct the research or the demographics studied	Most useful when you are looking at studies that were done using various methods or researched different age groups, races, geographic origin, etc. <i>Example: When compiling a lit review about an infectious disease, you may place all of the studies surrounding teenagers together before looking at the studies on the elderly.</i>

General Tips

- Use quotes sparingly as paraphrasing, with citations, allows you to add more information in less space.
- Double check that all of your sources are on your works cited or reference page. Lit reviews are long and it can be easy to accidentally leave a name out of the list.
- Read other literature reviews to get a greater understanding of what they look like in practice.
- Lit reviews do not need to retell every detail of the sources you are using. It should address information that is directly relevant to the topic and/or you are working on.
- Visit the Writing Center! Getting another set of eyes on your assignment can help you make sure your writing is coming across exactly as you intend it and that all citations are included.

Works Consulted

Cantero, Christina. "How to Write a Literature Review," *San Jose State University Writing Center*. 2019.

<https://www.sjsu.edu/writingcenter/docs/handouts/Literature%20Reviews.pdf>.

The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "Literature Reviews," *UNC Writing Center*. <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/literature-reviews/>. Accessed 5 Dec. 2024.