

The Literature Review:

Some Guidelines

A literature review:

- Discusses published work on a certain subject area
- Functions as a guide to others' work in this area
- Provides both **summary** and **synthesis** of research. What is **synthesis**?

To **synthesize** research is to interpret, re-organize, and draw connections.

It includes:

- Comparing important research, or new and old interpretations
- Charting the evolution of the subject
- Evaluating sources in the area of this subject

Why write a literature review?

- To provide an introduction to work in this area
- To keep up to date on what is current in the field
- To establish your credibility as a writer or researcher in this area
- To provide a solid background for investigation in a research paper

Crafting a Literature Review: 4 Steps

1. Establish the scope of your review

- Choose your area of inquiry
- Formulate and refine your **research question**
- Narrow your topic

1. Establish the scope of your review

- Choose your area of inquiry
- Formulate and refine your **research question**
- Narrow your topic

For example....

Say I want to research **expeditionary learning in schools**. This is a **big** topic.

So I need to find ways to **limit, narrow, and focus my subject**, and I need to **formulate a specific research question**.

For example: In the field of expeditionary learning, what are

Learning outcomes? Strategies for teacher training?
Developments in institutional policies? Student failure rates? Approaches to deviant behavior? Success rates?

Any way that we can narrow the scope helps:

For example:

If we're talking about **effects of** expeditionary learning:
Effects on which ability level, age, discipline, etc.? What type of effect – educational, social, psychological, etc.?

Keep in mind:

- Honing a research question and writing a literature review are **recursive** processes – **reassessing and revising are part of the job.**
- **It would be hard to create a perfect research question without first doing any research or writing:** Research and writing **themselves** help us know what we want to say.
- **It's normal (and good!) for your research question to shift** as you research and write, and/or for your review to change as you hone your question: **It means you're adapting to what you find in your research.**

Keep in mind:

- Honing a research question and writing a literature review are **recursive** processes – **reassessing and revising are part of the job.**
- **It would be hard to create a perfect research question without first doing any research or writing:** Research and writing **themselves** help us know what we want to say.
- **It's normal (and good!) for your research question to shift** as you research and write, and/or for your review to change as you hone your question: **It means you're adapting to what you find in your research.**
Now let's move on to discuss that research....

2. Read and evaluate sources

As you do, consider:

- **Qualifications and reputation** of authors and publishers.
- **Publication dates.** Are sources current? Has their research been superseded?
- **Language.** Is it clear? Objective?
- **Methodology.** How well is research designed and described? Are measuring instruments accurate and reliable?

2. Read and evaluate sources

Also consider:

- **Research goals.** Are they clearly stated and met? Do they reflect commonly accepted practice in the field?
- **Research coverage.** Original research, or secondary sources? Extent and nature of bibliography and of study or surveying.
- **Authority.** Regarded as authoritative and accurate? Cited by other researchers?

Once you've read and assessed the research, it's time to figure out:

- **Your take on what you've encountered; and**
- **How what you've found ties together.**

That is to say that it's time for SYNTHESIS.

Or , to put it another way, it's time to....

3. Find a focus and thesis

- **Look for a theme** that connects the sources.

For example:

Is one common solution offered, or different ones?

Are there any gaps?

How well do the sources treat the subject?

Do they reveal a trend in the field?

A debate?

Does one theory seem to unite the treatments of the subject, or different theories?

- **Focus your review** around this theme.
- **State a thesis** that articulates this theme, answers your research question, and argues your particular perspective on the research.

Sample theses:

- Education scholars are sharply divided on the benefits and proper use of video gaming technology in elementary classrooms.

Show a debate on the subject.

- The current trend in college-level writing remediation emphasizes a combination of computer diagnostics and coordinated instructor support.

Shows a current trend.

- The last ten years have shown an increase cultural scholars' willingness to examine popular computer media as an academic subject.

Shows a change over time.

4. Organize your review.

It will have the same basic structure as a simple paper for ENG 101:

- Introduction
- Body
- Conclusion

Let's quickly review what wants to be in each part....

Introduction

Here, you'll establish:

- **Context.** Identify the general topic, issue, or area of inquiry.
- **Point of View.** Your reason for reviewing this literature, the questions you're investigating, and your preliminary thesis.
- **Structure.** Organization by which literature is compared and contrasted.
- **Scope.** Criteria or categories used to include or not include literature.
- **Importance.** A case for the importance of your research to that field.

Body

- First, choose an **organizational strategy**.
Structure your review by:

Body

- First, choose an **organizational strategy**.

Structure your review by:

a) **Chronology**: Reveal development or progression of a trend.

For example:

I might look at **the evolution** of institutional policy toward homogenous grouping **since the 1970's**.

Body

- First, choose an **organizational strategy**.

Structure your review by:

b) **Theme**: Elucidate one topic through specific categories, or points and sub-points.

For example:

I might break down the Effects of homogenous grouping into **specific categories** of Academic, Social, and Psychological Effects.

Body

- First, choose an **organizational strategy**.

Structure your review by:

c) **Theory or philosophy**: Classify based on authors' various approaches.

For example:

I might compare the respective stances on homogeneous grouping of the **specific philosophies** of essentialism, progressivism, and holism.

Body

- Now, use evidence from your sources to discuss your take on the literature.

As you do:

- **Be selective:** Use information most directly relevant to the thesis.
- **Maintain your own voice:** Use quotes sparingly; summarize and paraphrase.
- **Synthesize:** Rephrase significance; relate information to your own argument.
- **Cite:** Use APA citation formatting.

Conclusion

These can seem tricky, but here are some **approaches to consider**:

- Summarize major contributions to the body of knowledge under review, maintaining your focus.
- Critically evaluate the current state of the body of knowledge reviewed.
- Suggest the relevance of the central topic to the larger discipline or profession.

Further Resources for Literature Reviews

<http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/literature-reviews/>

[http://www.gse.harvard.edu/library/services/
research_instruction/litreviewguides530.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/library/services/research_instruction/litreviewguides530.html)

[http://www.library.arizona.edu/help/tutorials/litreviews/
components.html](http://www.library.arizona.edu/help/tutorials/litreviews/components.html)

For **Writing Support**, contact:

Megan Grumbling

MGrumbling@une.edu

or

John Daugherty

JDaugherty@une.edu

For **Online Academic Support** , contact

Henri Moser

HMoser@une.edu