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# WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW

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## Definition

A literature review is both a summary and explanation of the complete and current state of knowledge on a limited topic as found in academic books and journal articles. There are two kinds of literature reviews you might write at university: one that students are asked to write as a stand-alone assignment in a course, often as part of their training in the research processes in their field, and the other that is written as part of an introduction to, or preparation for, a longer work, usually a thesis or research report. The focus and perspective of your review and the kind of hypothesis or thesis argument you make will be determined by what kind of review you are writing. One way to understand the differences between these two types is to read published literature reviews or the first chapters of theses and dissertations in your own subject area. Analyse the structure of their arguments and note the way they address the issues.

## Purpose of the Literature Review

- It gives readers easy access to research on a particular topic by selecting high quality articles or studies that are relevant, meaningful, important and valid and summarizing them into one complete report.
- It provides an excellent starting point for researchers beginning to do research in a new area by forcing them to summarize, evaluate, and compare original research in that specific area.
- It ensures that researchers do not duplicate work that has already been done.
- It can provide clues as to where future research is heading or recommend areas on which to focus.
- It highlights key findings.
- It identifies inconsistencies, gaps and contradictions in the literature.
- It provides a constructive analysis of the methodologies and approaches of other researchers.

## Content of the Review

### Introduction

The introduction explains the focus and establishes the importance of the subject. It discusses what kind of work has been done on the topic and identifies any controversies within the field or any recent research which has raised questions about earlier assumptions. It may provide background or history. It concludes with a purpose or thesis statement. In a stand-alone literature review, this statement will sum up and evaluate the state of the art in this field of research; in a review that is an introduction or preparatory to a thesis or research report, it will suggest how the review findings will lead to the research the writer proposes to undertake.

### Body

Often divided by headings/subheadings, the body summarizes and evaluates the current state of knowledge in the field. It notes major themes or topics, the most important trends, and any findings about which researchers agree or disagree. If the review is preliminary to your own thesis or research project, its purpose is to make an argument that will justify your proposed research. Therefore, it will discuss only that research which leads directly to your own project.

### Conclusion

The conclusion summarizes all the evidence presented and shows its significance. If the review is an introduction to your own research, it highlights gaps and indicates how previous research leads to your own research project and chosen methodology. If the review is a stand-alone assignment for a course, it should suggest any practical applications of the research as well as the implications and possibilities for future research.

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# Nine Steps to Writing a Literature Review

## 1. Find a working topic.

Look at your specific area of study. Think about what interests you, and what is fertile ground for study. Talk to your professor, brainstorm, and read lecture notes and recent issues of periodicals in the field.

## 2. Review the literature.

- Using keywords, search a computer database. It is best to use at least two databases relevant to your discipline.
- Remember that the reference lists of recent articles and reviews can lead to valuable papers.
- Make certain that you also include any studies contrary to your point of view.

## 3. Focus your topic narrowly and select papers accordingly.

Consider the following:

- What interests you?
- What interests others?
- What time span of research will you consider?

Choose an area of research that is due for a review.

## 4. Read the selected articles thoroughly and evaluate them.

- What assumptions do most/some researchers seem to be making?
- What methodologies do they use? - what testing procedures, subjects, material tested?
- Evaluate and synthesize the research findings and conclusions drawn.
- Note experts in the field: names/labs that are frequently referenced.
- Note conflicting theories, results, methodologies.
- Watch for popularity of theories and how this has/has not changed over time.

## 5. Organize the selected papers by looking for patterns and by developing sub-topics.

Note things such as:

- Findings that are common/contested
- Two or three important trends in the research
- The most influential theories

## 6. Develop a working thesis.

Write a one- or two-sentence statement summarizing the conclusion you have reached about the major trends and developments you see in the research that has been done on your subject.

## 7. Organize your own paper based on the findings from steps 4 & 5.

Develop headings/subheadings. If your literature review is extensive, find a large table surface, and on it place post-it notes or filing cards to organize all your findings into categories. Move them around if you decide that (a) they fit better under different headings, or (b) you need to establish new topic headings.

## 8. Write the body of the paper

Follow the plan you have developed above, making certain that each section links logically to the one before and after, and that you have divided your sections by themes or subtopics, not by reporting the work of individual theorists or researchers.

## 9. Look at what you have written; focus on analysis, not description.

Look at the topic sentences of each paragraph. If you were to read only these sentences, would you find that your paper presented a clear position, logically developed, from beginning to end? If, for example, you find that each paragraph begins with a researcher's name, it might indicate that, instead of evaluating and comparing the research literature from an analytical point of view, you have simply described what research has been done. This is one of the most common problems with student literature reviews. So if your paper still does not appear to be defined by a

central, guiding concept, or if it does not critically analyse the literature selected, then you should make a new outline based on what you have said in each section and paragraph of the paper, and decide whether you need to add information, to delete off-topic information, or to re-structure the paper entirely.

For example, look at the following two passages and note that Student A is merely describing the literature and Student B takes a more analytical and evaluative approach, by comparing and contrasting. You can also see that this evaluative approach is well signalled by linguistic markers indicating logical connections (words such as “however,” “moreover”) and phrases such as “substantiates the claim that,” which indicate supporting evidence and Student B’s ability to synthesize knowledge.

**Student A:**

Smith (2000) concludes that personal privacy in their living quarters is the most important factor in nursing home residents’ perception of their autonomy. He suggests that the physical environment in the more public spaces of the building did not have much impact on their perceptions. Neither the layout of the building, nor the activities available seem to make much difference.

Jones and Johnstone make the claim that the need to control one’s environment is a fundamental need of life (2001), and suggest that the approach of most institutions, which is to provide total care, may be as bad as no care at all. If people have no choices or think that they have none, they become depressed.

**Student B:**

After studying residents and staff from two intermediate care facilities in Calgary, Alberta, Smith (2000) came to the conclusion that except for the amount of personal privacy available to residents, the physical environment of these institutions had minimal if any effect on their perceptions of control (autonomy). However, French (1998) and Haroon (2000) found that availability of private areas is not the only aspect of the physical environment that determines residents’ autonomy. Haroon interviewed 115 residents from 32 different nursing homes known to have different levels of autonomy (2000). It was found that physical structures, such as standardized furniture, heating that could not be individually regulated, and no possession of a house key for residents limited their feelings of independence. Moreover, Hope (2002), who interviewed 225 residents from various nursing homes, substantiates the claim that characteristics of the institutional environment such as the extent of resources in the facility, as well as its location, are features which residents have indicated as being of great importance to their independence.

## Finishing Touches: Revising and Editing Your Work

- Read your work out loud. That way you will be better able to identify where you need punctuation marks to signal pauses or divisions within sentences, where you have made grammatical errors, or where your sentences are unclear.
- Since the purpose of a literature review is to demonstrate that the writer is familiar with the important professional literature on the chosen subject, check to make certain that you have covered all of the important, up-to-date, and pertinent texts. In the sciences and some of the social sciences it is important that your literature be quite recent; this is not so important in the humanities.
- Make certain that all of the citations and references are correct and that you are referencing in the appropriate style for your discipline. If you are uncertain which style to use, ask your professor.
- Check to make sure that you have not plagiarized either by failing to cite a source of information, or by using words quoted directly from a source. (Usually if you take three or more words directly from another source, you should put those words within quotation marks, and cite the page.)
- Text should be written in a clear and concise academic style; it should not be descriptive in nature or use the language of everyday speech.
- There should be no grammatical or spelling errors.
- Sentences should flow smoothly and logically.
- In a paper in the sciences, or in some of the social sciences, the use of subheadings to organize the review is recommended.

## Additional Relevant Fastfacts

- [Writing University Essays](#)
- [Improving Your Writing](#)
- [Plagiarism and Academic Integrity](#)

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## Need Advice or More Information?

[Writing Services](#), located in the Learning Commons on the 1st floor of the Library, is the best source on campus and online for advice and information on writing issues.

- Peer Helpers from a variety of disciplines offer individual writing assistance to first-year students and ESL students. And all University of Guelph students – undergraduate and graduate – are entitled to three free individual writing consultations per semester with our professional staff. Appointments are recommended.
- Visit the [Learning Commons](#) home page to find out about all our writing programs and services, or e-mail questions to [writing@uoguelph.ca](mailto:writing@uoguelph.ca).
- Fastfacts handouts (like this one) provide information on a range of learning, writing, and academic computing issues and are free to registered students. The complete range of Fastfacts is available on the [Learning Commons website](#).
- More detailed information on writing university papers can be found in our Learning Commons publications, available for purchase at the Learning Commons reception desk or the campus bookstore.
- Workshops, seminars, and short courses on learning, studying and writing topics are offered regularly each semester. Please contact the Learning Commons for details.

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