ELS

Effective Learning Service

Writing a Literature Review

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Please note:

This leaflet is a generic document, providing general guidelines to the process of writing a literature review.

Literature reviews vary in type depending on their purpose and also on the discipline for which they are written.

For this reason, before you begin working on your literature review, it is important that you discuss with a subject tutor what is required in your discipline.

A good way to develop a clear idea about the nature of literature reviews in your discipline is to read some examples before you write your own.

What is a review of the literature?

A literature review:

- discusses published information in a particular subject area
- is a select analysis of existing research which is relevant to your topic
- usually has an organizational pattern and combines both summary and synthesis
- is not simply a summary of each of your sources listed one by one.

How does a literature review differ from an academic essay?

The review, like other forms of expository writing, has an introduction, body and conclusion, well-formed paragraphs, and a logical structure. However, in other kinds of expository writing you use relevant literature to support the discussion of your thesis; in a literature review, the literature itself is the subject of discussion.

In **an academic essay** the main focus is on supporting your own argument.

In **a literature review** the main focus is summarising and synthesising and evaluating the arguments and ideas of others**.**

Why write a literature review?

It is written:

- to provide background information about a research topic
- to establish the importance of a topic
- to demonstrate familiarity with a topic/problem
- to reveal gaps in current work and "carve out a space" for further work.

The reasons for writing a particular review will depend on the type of review. Different types of literature reviews have different purposes. The most common are listed below.

Stand alone literature reviews

These provide an overview and analysis of the current state of research on a topic or question. The goal is to evaluate and compare previous research on a topic to provide an analysis of what is currently known; and also to reveal controversies, weaknesses or gaps in current work.

Part of a research proposal

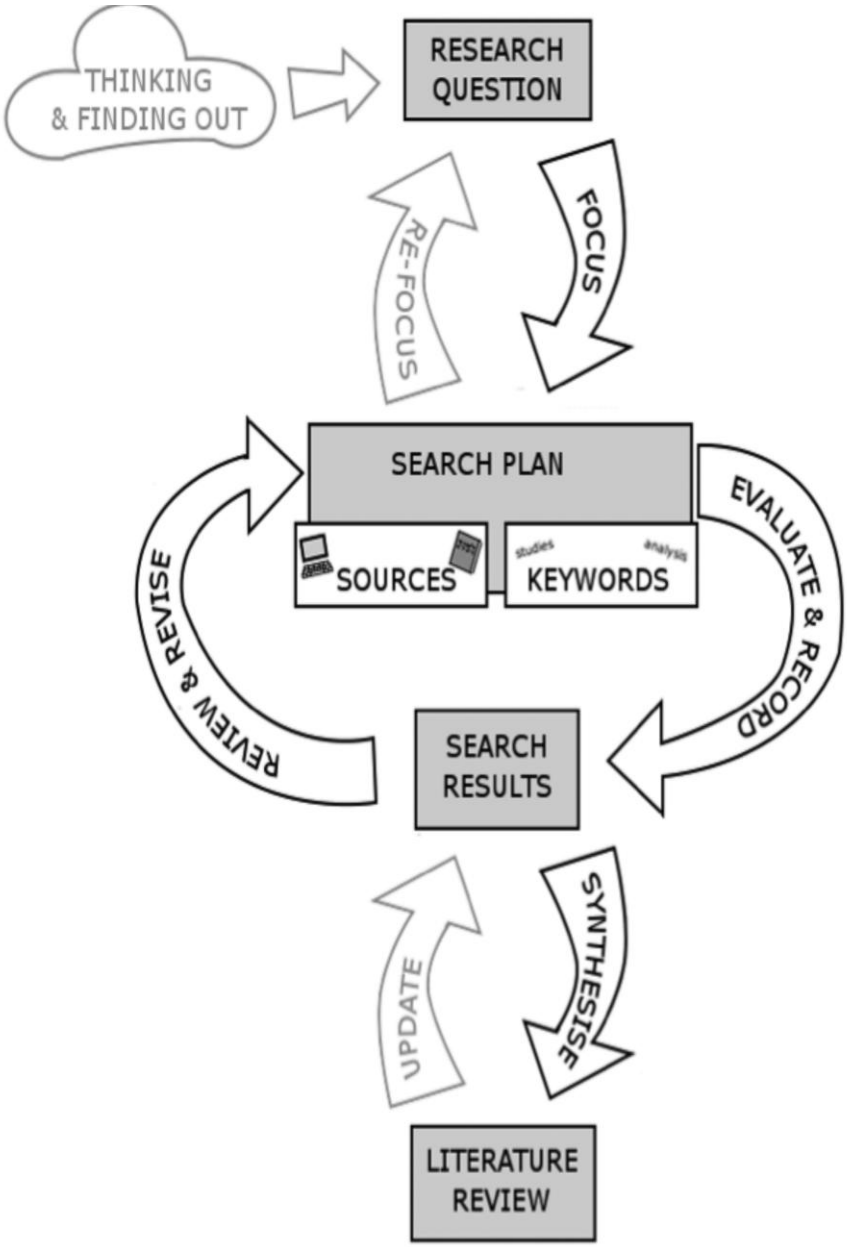
(for a PhD dissertation, a thesis, a class project, or for a submission for a grant) By pointing out current issues and questions concerning a topic, the review is crucial to demonstrating how your proposed research will contribute to the field.

Part of a research report

The review should provide the context to which your work is a contribution.

The steps of the literature review process

A literature search can be a daunting process but there are some simple steps which can help you plan and manage the process. The diagram below shows how these steps interact as you move through the literature search and review.



Adapted from: www.library.dmu.ac.uk

As you can see, this is not always a linear process; depending on the size and scope of your literature review, you may find yourself returning to some of these steps repeatedly as you continue to focus your project.

Searching for and selecting sources

Topic and focus

Define what your topic and focus will be. This can be difficult. However, searching will be easier if you first narrow your scope. Do bear in mind, though, that you may need to broaden the scope if you are not finding enough sources! This may become more apparent as you search for and find information. It may prove difficult to find research on very narrow topics, or to cope with the vast literature on an un-focused, broad topic.

Search method

To ensure the topic is covered adequately, a clear method or plan is needed.

- Identify some preliminary search terms.
- Create a list of keywords, terms, and phrases related to your topic.
- Begin to identify tools to use for searching.

Choosing the right key words and search strategies and using appropriate databases are essential starting points. Drawing on different search methods to access a variety of sources ensures the most relevant articles. The LRC has many useful resources to help you to get started.

Sources

The number of sources you will be required to review will depend on the purpose of the review and on how advanced you are in your studies. It could be from six sources at first year undergraduate level to more than fifty for a thesis. **Ask your lecturer for guidance on this.**

For most literature reviews you will need to focus on academically authoritative texts: academic books, journals, research reports, government publications.

- Journal articles normally have the most up-to-date research and you will be expected to refer to them in your literature review. It is always better to use primary sources; however, if you do consider some secondary sources to be useful, where possible go back to review the primary source cited in them.

- A good way to find sources is to look at the reference lists in articles or books already identified as relevant to your topic. You will be expected to prioritise recent research, but it is also important to acknowledge the standard texts in your field. An easy way to identify these is to check reference lists to see which texts are frequently cited.

- Abstracts: You may find the amount of literature overwhelming. You need to select the papers you will need in your review with as little effort as possible. In order to narrow down the number of sources you feel it is appropriate to read it is useful to look through the abstracts of the sources first. After reading the abstract, you can then make an informed judgment about whether the whole article is worth reading.

Preparing to read and evaluate

Once you have read through the abstracts you should be left with a selection of literature that fits within the scope you have selected for your review.

While you look through the sources you need to consider how the material can best be organized in your review; think about what organisational pattern would best fit with your topic.

There are numerous ways to organize the material in a literature review. For example, you might organize the selected readings by

- different theoretical approaches
- specific concepts or issues
- different methodologies employed

Such methods are generally better than organizing chronologically or by author. The latter often result in a boring review or one lacking clarity or direction.

It is common to organize a literature review thematically. Thematic reviews are organised around a topic or issue. Each paragraph (or section if it is a long thesis) of the literature review should classify and evaluate the themes of the texts that are relevant to your thesis.

The point is to try to get the information in the sources organized in some form so that you know how you will treat them in your review. It helps to have an organisational pattern in mind before you start to take notes.

As you read

Take notes

Critically read each source. Summaries have their uses, but they are not the building blocks of a good literature review. Taking notes and making critical comments is more useful. Look for arguments rather than facts.

Remember to note down clear references including page numbers in case you want to look at the original material again or cite it in your review.

One possible way of recording notes is to use a ‘synthesis’ matrix. This allows you to sort and categorize the different arguments presented on an issue. As you combine information you will begin to see each section of your paper taking shape.

Synthesis Matrices

There are clearly many different ways of organising your notes; below is one example.

Here along the top of the chart are the spaces to record sources and you can then work vertically in the column belonging to that source, recording as much information as possible about each theme/subtopic/stage of research.. Follow the same pattern for other sources. In the new sources, you may find new subtopics which you need to add to your list on the left.

Some of the sources may not cover all of the ideas listed on the left. This can be useful too because it can provide clues about possible gaps in the current state of knowledge of your topic.

Sample blank matrix

	Source A	Source B	Source C	My comments/points to note
Theme/ subtopic 1/				
Theme/ subtopic 2				

Matrix example 1 This is an example of a matrix with the stages of research being the 'subtopics' on the left hand column.

Topic: Older Homeless Women

	Author and title	Author and title	Comments
	Butler and Weatherley (1995) Pathways to homelessness among middle-aged women	**Cohen et al. (1997)** Predictors of becoming redomiciled among older homeless women	
Purpose of study	To examine circumstances that led to homelessness and how homeless women coped	To test a model to predict likelihood of older women leaving homelessness based on (1) individual factors; (2)acculturation process (3) structural/systemic factors	
Method	Qualitative descriptive	Quantitative questionnaires designed around variables in 10 broad predictor categories which made up proposed model	
Sample	11 women from Seattle, age = 45 – 65, 3 women of colour (27%)	201 women in New York. Mean age = 59. AA = 25%, White = 17%, Hispanic = 5%, Other = 2 %. Psychotic = 40%, Separated/divorced = 53%.	*11 women = big enough sample? Enough cultural variety*
Findings	Mental illness, substance abuse, physical illness, separation, widowhood, divorce …….	Those housed at end of two year (47%) had greater income, more support, …. less likely to exhibit psychotic symptoms but no difference in rates of depression	*Why no difference in rates of depression? Look into this more? ….*

Matrix example 2 Here the 'subtopics' are themes..

Topic: Cheating in education

	Finn and Frone (2004)	**Crown and Spiller (1998)**	**Lupton and Chapman (2000)**	**West et al. (2004)**	**Comments**
Sub Topic 1 **Academic dishonesty is pervasive problem in education**	Academic cheating = recognised as highly prevalent and ongoing problem at all grade levels	Issue attracting attention and considered a serious problem among college students	55% of US students reported that they had cheated during college	In a recent study they found 74% students cheated on a take-home test.	*What does 'highly prevalent' mean?* *Who did F and F interview? How many?* *What is meant by 'cheated' (L and C)*

The next sub-topic is organised in a slightly different way:

	Gender	***Attitudes***	***Views of cheating***	***Outside life***
Sub-topic 2 **What causes students to engage in academically dishonest behaviour**	**Roig and Caso (2005**) found no significant difference in plagiarism between genders. **Crown and Spiller (1998)** found no significant gender differences. Females consistently report lower cheating rates than males **(Davis et al. 1992)**	**Bernardi et al. (2004)** indicate a highly significant association between students' attitudes on cheating academic integrity, and academic dishonesty/ honesty.. Attitudes towards cheating differ considerably among Russia, the Netherlands, Israel and the US **(Magnus et al. 2002).**	Not all cheating is viewed alike **(Pincus and Schmelkin 2003).** **Lupton et al.'s study (2000)** found American students did not believe that giving someone past exams or using exams from a prior semester was cheating, whereas the Polish students did.	Relationship identified between engaging in unethical behaviour in academic setting and attitudes towards behaviour in business **(Lawson 2004).** **Sims (1993)** positive relationship between the level of dishonesty at school and work.
Comments	*What kind of study did Davis et al. conduct?*	*Perhaps need to look at the impact that parental attitudes have on cheating.*	*Need to look more closely at this – which types of cheating are considered most serious by students?*	

Starting to think about writing

Structure and organisation

Like most academic papers, literature reviews contain at least three basic elements: an introduction, body and conclusion, each of which should include some of the following:

Introduction	A brief background to the topic; the broad context of your research area and the main topics you are investigating. It briefly highlights the relevant issues or debates that have characterised your field of research. It could also 'signpost' to the reader the organisational pattern of the lit review.
Body	An analysis of the literature according to a number of themes or topics; usually organised thematically. It may have headings. **(You can write your literature review one section at a time, but make sure you read through them all to check they link together and tell a coherent "story".)**
Conclusion	This should summarise the current state of the research in your field as analysed in the main body. It should identify any gaps or problems with the existing research. It could explain how your investigation is going to address these gaps or build on the existing research.

The 5 C's of writing a literature review

Cite: Keep the primary focus on the literature.

Compare the various arguments, theories, methodologies, approaches expressed in the literature. What do the authors agree on? Who employs similar approaches?

Contrast the various arguments, themes, methodologies approaches and controversies expressed in the literature. What are the major areas of disagreement, controversy, debate?

Critique the literature: which arguments are most persuasive, and why? Which approaches, findings, methodologies seems most reliable, valid or appropriate, and why?

Connect the literature to your own area of research and investigation.

Focus on analysis, not description

Look at the synthesis matrix below and then study the paragraph which follows.

Research topic Care homes: residents' perception of autonomy	(A) Smith	(B) French	(C) Haroon	(D) Hope	**Points to note/comments**
article title/ details	Care home environments, motivation, and psychological adjustment (2000)	Nursing home environments and resident autonomy (1998)	Nursing home residents: dependence and independence (2000)	Enhancing the autonomy of nursing home residents (2002)	
methods	Qualitative: residents/staff in two intermediate care facilities		Qualitative: 115 residents / 32 nursing homes (different autonomy levels)	Qualitative: 225 residents various nursing homes	*A= smaller number of institutions and residents interviewed. Also interviewed staff– significant?* *C = different levels autonomy – significant?*
findings	Physical environment had minimum effects on residents' perception of autonomy (apart from personal privacy available)	Availability of private areas = not only aspect phys. envir/mt.. that determines autonomy	Privacy not only aspect. Physical structures (standardised furniture/f heating/no house key) = limited feeling of independence.	Resources and also location = features which are important to residents for their independence.	*B, C, D disagree with A – bigger interview samples?* *D also considers location is important.*

Focus on analysis not description

This passage below is taking an **analytical and evaluative** approach to the literature by **comparing and contrasting** it.

This approach is well signalled by linguistic markers indicating logical connections: words such as '*however',* and *'moreover*". It also uses phrases such as '*substantiates the claim that'* which indicate supporting evidence and the writer's **ability to synthesise knowledge**.

Existing research does not agree on the impact which physical environment can have on care home residents' perception of autonomy. 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 and heating that could not be individually regulated limited residents' 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. While Smith's findings appear to **differ considerably from** those of French, Haroon and Hope, this could be because only Smith interviewed staff as well as residents and this may have impacted on the results.

Note: the underlined sections are where the writer makes his point using his 'voice' to comment on the literature.

"Weaving in" the literature : using your 'voice'

It is important to remember that while the literature review presents others' ideas, ***your*** voice should be clear. In other words, you should take on an active role as the writer.

It is not sufficient to simply describe or summarise ideas from the literature; you need to use the literature to make points or to locate your ideas in relation to the existing body of knowledge

You need to use your voice to:

- synthesise or integrate the literature
- comment on, or critique, the literature.

Look at the following example from a literature review.

- The shaded areas are where the writer is using his 'voice' to comment on the literature.
- The expressions written **in bold** are expressions which are frequently used and could be used in your own writing.

The existing literature on homelessness **strongly suggests that there are many problems associated with** life without a home. **Studies have shown that** homelessness **is associated with** problem behaviours in children (Edleman and Mihaly 1989; Di Biase and Waddell 1995), strained family relationships (Vostainis et al 1996); Nyamathi et al. 1999), higher exposure to trauma (Hien and Bukzpan 1999); Buhrich et al. 2000), increased anger and depression (Marshal et al. 1996) and the negative psychological impact of social stigma (Lankenau 1999). **Because of the methodological difficulties related to studying** homelessness, **it is unclear whether** factors such as depression and alcohol abuse are causes or effects of homelessness. While prior history of mental illness is undoubtedly responsible for homelessness in a least some cases**, there is evidence to suggest that** the experience of homelessness causes or exacerbates many psychological problems. In a study by Shlay (1994) for example, homeless people were found to report greater emotional well-being and fewer behavioural problems in their children after positive changes in their economic and social status.

Studies on the harmful effects of homelessness **are consistent with a larger body of literature** examining the relation between income and subjective well-being. In large national surveys, for example, income has been shown to be moderately correlated with life satisfaction, especially at the lower economic levels and in the poorest countries (Diener et al. 1999; Diener and Lucas 2000; Diener aBiswas-Diener 2002). Higher income has been shown to be related to increased longevity (Wilkenson 1996), better health (Salovy et al. 2000), and greater life satisfaction (Diener et al. 1985; Diener and Oishi 2000**). Scholars appear to agree that** although correlations between income and subjective well-being are often modest, there appears to be a curvilinear relationship in which money has the greatest impact on psychological health at the lowest economic levels (Inglehart and Klingemann 2000).

CHECKLIST

Once you have written your review, check to make sure you have achieved the following:

Have you

- **outlined the purpose and scope?**
- **identified appropriate and credible (academic/scholarly) literature?**
- **recorded the bibliographical details of the sources?**
- **analysed and critiqued the readings? Instead of just listing and summarising items, do you assess them, discussing strengths and weaknesses?**
- **identified gaps in the literature and research?**
- **explored methodologies / theories / hypotheses / models?**
- **discussed the varying viewpoints?**
- **written an introduction, body and conclusion?**
- **checked punctuation and spelling?**

Types of 'reporting' verbs

When you use information from sources you have read you need to choose a suitable reporting verb to introduce it. This choice will depend on why you are using the information. What role in supporting your argument does it have?

There are **three basic reasons** for using a reporting verb:

- to present the **aim of the study** you are summarising/quoting
  e.g. Smith (2009) **examines** the relationship between diabetes and heart disease.
- to talk about the **results** the author you are summarising/quoting has found
  e.g. Al-Mawali (2008) **shows** that deaths per capita in car accidents particularly high in developing countries.
- to give the **opinion** of the author you are summarising/quoting
  e.g. Marklin (2004, p. 76) argues that "the adoption of just-in-time delivery systems was the decisive factor for Japanese economic success in the 1980s."

The following table presents some of the most common reporting verbs.
Note: some verbs (marked *) can be used to introduce either **results** or **opinion**, depending on the context/grammar.

aim of study	results	opinion
investigate	show (that)	state (that)
examine	suggest (that) *	believe (that)
analyse	find (that)	argue (that)
look at	indicate (that)	note (that)*
focus on	identify x as	point out (that)
consider	reveal (that)	observe (that0*
identify	establish (that)	consider (that)
report (on)	confirm (that)	hold (that)
be concerned with	conclude (that)*	claim (that)
	demonstrate (that)	emphasise/stress (that)

Tense of reporting verbs

The tense most commonly used for reporting verbs is the **present simple** (see examples above). However, other tenses are also important:

The past simple

This, of course, can be used to show that something happened or was written a long time ago.

e.g. 'This was demonstrated in the 1984 WHO report.'

However, it is also used in two other ways:

1) to increase the 'distance' between you and what you are referring to:

e.g. 'Lefevbre (2002) identified (x) as the main cause of (y).
(*but you think he may be wrong*).

2) in scientific writing, to present methodology/results of one specific piece of research,

e.g. 'Data was obtained, and was cross-checked by .../
Brown found that .... / The results were consistent with ...'.

N. B. When you move from 'results' to 'discussion/conclusion', it is usual to move from **past simple** to **present simple,**

e.g. 'Therefore, the findings indicate that ...*'.* At this point, you are moving from describing what happened in one piece of research, to what may always/frequently happen; i.e. you are generalising.

The present perfect

This is used to introduce a topic by talking about general research in the area,

e.g. 'Various studies have looked at ...',

or 'Few researchers have investigated *...'*