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Dissertations: The A-Z of literature reviews

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Introduction

In this resource we will guide you through, what a **literature review** is and its **components**. We will also look at how to start **planning** and **preparing** for your literature review

The purpose of a literature review

Literature reviews are often part of a larger piece of academic writing (for example, a chapter in a dissertation) but can also be discrete, standalone pieces of research (such as review articles in academic journals).

The aim of a literature review is to identify any gaps that your research will attempt to address, to assist in the development of your enquiry and to give the reader a better understanding of the subject.

What does a literature review include?



Is part of a literature review...



To identify significant pieces of research on a topic.



To set the scene and provide the context for your research in terms of the content and methodology.



To acknowledge the relevant work that has been done by others in the field.



To identify any possible gaps in the research and to justify your own enquiry.



To identify the terminology and methodology associated with the research.



Is **not** part of a literature review...



To explain the methodology of your approach.



To list everything that has been published on a topic.



To publish the findings of your own research.



To criticise other scholars' writing on the subject.

The components of a literature review

Relevant literature:

Your review should contain references to the literature that has assisted you on our journey in your enquiry. The literature that you select should meet the purposes of the review as identified earlier.

Key authors:

Comparing and contrasting the views of different authors on the 'issue' will bring discussion into your review. You can group authors who draw similar conclusions into your writing to set the context for your research and opinions so you become a part of the discussion.

Seminal literature:

It is important that your review includes the literature that has set the foundations of the theories or methodologies related to your review.

Defined scope of review:

Your review should include the parameters of your review. This would include thinking about the years that you might be searching across and how you will search. It should also include the reasoning why you have made these decisions.

The components of a literature review

Key debates:

Your review should be objective and include the details of the debates and challenges that exist in your field of enquiry as have been highlighted by researchers in the field.

Synthesised themes:

Your literature review should indicate the common themes that you have identified during the review.

Major/key debates:

Highlight the areas in which the key authors are in disagreement and oppose each other. This can often lead to a space where there is room for you to add your voice to the discussion.

Summary of known/unknown:

There should be a summary to conclude your review. This should include what is known from the literature and what is not known. This is vital if the literature is a part of a bigger piece of work such as a dissertation.

Preparing for your literature review

The basis for a solid literature review is your literature search. Through reading and understanding your subject area you should be able to ask questions about what you have learnt. Further questions will drive towards new data and knowledge as you begin to draw connections and patterns from what you have read.



[Take a look at some of the other My Learning Essentials resources on searching.](#)

The skills demonstrated...

Your review overall will demonstrate a range of skills to your examiner and these are worth bearing in mind when you are writing up your review.

Do you recognise them?



Synthesis of literature



Effective searching skills



Critical thinking



Evaluation of research methods



Awareness of field including the history, terminology and debates



Referencing

Frequently asked questions...

How long will it take?

This depends on the topic but a good literature review needs adequate time to carry out a thorough literature search and to read and evaluate the material. You may also need to obtain material that is not available in the Library and this can take a while.

Where do I start looking?

Your course leader/ supervisor/ tutor may be able to give you some initial pointers in terms of significant writers and key publications on a topic. You can talk to a librarian who will be able to give you some helpful pointers and guide you to the best subject resources.

Textbooks can be useful in setting out the key themes in a subject area and will usually include a list of references for further reading. Academic journals often include review articles that summarise the significant research in a specific topic. Subject databases will usually allow you to limit your search to 'review articles'.

These will help you to identify some of the main research in your subject area.



Talk to a librarian

Frequently asked questions...

What should it include?

Literature reviews are about the academic context of a subject. As such they would usually focus on published works of an academic nature. Your review should provide a balanced, synthesised account of the relevant works in which you demonstrate that you have understood the existing research on a topic and are clearly able to set your own ideas within this wider context.

The literature review would not usually include unpublished research findings, primary source material you intend to use in your own research or secondary sources that are not of an academic quality.

These may be valid and useful in your own investigation but would appear elsewhere in your thesis, not in the review.

When do I stop looking?

As you read around a subject, keeping in mind your own research topic and areas to explore, you should start to form a mental picture of the existing landscape.

You will need to discuss ideas, writers and sources that illustrate and identify the key themes but it is not necessary to detail every piece of work on a subject. Once you have established the context for your own research and introduced the ideas you think are relevant you can move on.

Frequently asked questions...

How can I link emerging arguments?

When writing your literature review remember not to just describe what one writer says, and then go on to give a general overview of another writer, and then another, and so on.

Grouping together key authors and research will help you with this along with linking words. When grouping together writers with similar opinions, try using words or phrases such as: similarly, in addition, also, again.

If there is disagreement, you need to show your awareness of this clearly by using linking words and phrases such as: however, on the other hand, conversely, nevertheless.



For more helping with linking words and phrases take a look at the University of Manchester 'Academic Phrasebank'.

Frequently asked questions...

Where can I go for more help?

Your course leader/ supervisor/ tutor should be the first person you ask for help if you are unclear about your dissertation/ thesis.

If you need help in terms of identifying relevant sources of information, searching for literature, managing your search results or you would like to develop your academic writing skills you can contact the Library.



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Summary – next steps

Writing your literature review will be a constantly developing process. You cannot do all your reading and research before writing as it is often not until you start explaining a point in writing that you find where your argument is weak, and you need to collect more evidence.

It is worth beginning to write your review once you are part of the way through your reading, reviewing and rewriting it as you go.

Reading anything on your research area is a good start. As you continue you can make decisions about where to focus your reading.



Keep in touch!



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Related resources

Know your sources: types of information

Planning ahead: making your search work



Workshops

*Improving your literature review:
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