



Literature Review

This packet details the steps necessary to produce a literature review that may be required for work in various disciplines, including English, history and psychology. This packet is not intended to replace instructor guidelines and should not be used in that manner. The packet's intended use is as a supplement to classroom instruction on assembling a literature review. Therefore, it contains only general information that must be tailored to fit specific guidelines as required by your discipline and by your instructor.

This packet is subdivided into six sections:

I. General Information

States what a literature review is and what purpose it serves.

II. Process

Gives step-by-step instructions on how to get started on your literature review.

III. Organization

Explains the two most common ways of arranging information in a literature review.

IV. Format

Provides descriptions for two of the most common formats used in a literature review, the item to item comparison and contrast (Format A) and the criteria to criteria comparison and contrast (Format B).

V. Checklist

Allows appraisal of your completed literature review to assure that it follows all necessary guidelines.

VI. Resources

Lists helpful resources used to compile this packet so that you may obtain further information.

★ General Information ★

Definition

Literature reviews can have two roles: In their first role, they function as a stand-alone paper. At other times they will actually be part of a larger research thesis. In this handout, literature reviews will be referred to in the stand-alone sense. As a stand-alone paper, literature reviews are multi-layered and are more formal and detailed than book reviews. As the author of a literature review, you must become familiar with a large amount of research on a specific topic. You will then develop your own thesis about the topic related to this research. After this, you will classify and critically analyze research on the topic by **making a comparison** between several different studies and by **emphasizing** how these studies and their comparison relate to your own thesis.

In effect, a literature review is a paper that compiles, outlines and evaluates previously established research and relates it to your own thesis. It provides a context for readers as if they



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were researching the topic on their own. Just from reading your paper, readers should be able to gain insight into the amount and quality of research on the topic. Your thesis and the literature reviewed serve several important functions within the paper:

- **Your thesis** creates a foundation for the literature review because it helps narrow the topic by providing a sense of direction; however, you will have to conduct some initial research and reading before deciding on an appropriate thesis. Your personal thesis may be a statement addressing some of the following situations: “why your research needs to be carried out, how you came to choose certain methodologies or theories to work with, how your work adds to the research already carried out” (Brightwell, G. and Shaw, J., 1997-98), or it may present some other logical perspective.

- **Reviewed literature** is organized in a logical manner that best suits the topic of the review and the hypothesis of the literature (see Organization and Format). The selected method of organization and style of format should draw attention to similarities and differences among the reviewed literature; these similarities and differences are based on specific criteria you revealed in the literature review’s introduction. According to Brightwell and Shaw (1997-98), your goal in the body of the review “. . . should be to evaluate and show relationships *between the work already done* (Is Researcher Y’s theory more convincing than Researcher X’s? Did Researcher X build on the work of Researcher Y?) and *between this work and your own [thesis].*” Additional information on these topics can be found in the Organization and Format sections of this packet. Therefore, carefully planned organization is an essential part of any literature review.

Purpose

Although literature reviews may vary according to discipline, their overall goal is similar. A literature review serves as a compilation of the most significant sources on a subject and relates the findings of each of these sources in a rational manner while supporting the literature review author’s own thesis. A literature review establishes which sources are most relevant to its author’s point and which sources are most credible to the discipline at hand.

In a literature review, the results of previous research are summarized, organized and evaluated.

Discipline-Specificity

A literature review’s organization, format, level of detail and citation style may vary according to discipline because different disciplines have different audiences. Examples here pertain to the natural sciences, social sciences and humanities.

- **Natural and social sciences** The author of a literature review in the natural or social sciences must pay close attention to measurements, study populations and technical aspects of experimental findings. Typically, a portion of the natural or social sciences literature review is set aside for reviewing sources on the primary topic. Then, a comparative analysis or discussion section is used to analyze the similarities and differences among the sources, tying them in with the literature review author’s original thesis.

- **Humanities** The author of a literature review in the humanities usually does not set aside a special section for reviewing the sources; instead, citations may be found randomly throughout the paper. The literature being reviewed is arranged according to paragraphs based on the author’s points, which in turn, support the author’s thesis. The paper itself may not be called a literature review at all. It is more likely to be called a critical analysis.

Remember that the best bet for determining what type of literature review is appropriate for your course is checking with the instructor prior to beginning research.



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REVIEW

1. What is the purpose of a literature review? What is the connection between the author's thesis and the literature being reviewed?
2. What discipline will your literature review be classified in?

★ Process ★

1. Find several articles that deal with your research topic. Sometimes it is helpful to review the bibliography of one of the first scholarly sources that you encounter and compare it to the bibliographies of other sources on the topic. If the same source is listed within several of these bibliographies, it is probably a fundamental, credible source that will aid you in your review.

- 2.** Before you begin reviewing literature, realize that you are looking to accomplish two things:
- A.** Defining your research problem/thesis (examples: finding a flaw in research, continuing previous research, etc . . .)
 - B.** Reading and evaluating significant works that are relevant to your research problem.

You will be conducting Steps A and B simultaneously because the two form a circular pattern. As you read related sources (Step B), you define your problem, and as you define your problem (Step A) you will more easily be able to decide what material is relevant enough to be worthy of reading (Step B).

3. Once you begin reviewing, make an entry with complete bibliographical information and comments for each work that you are going to include in the review.

4. Compare the articles by evaluating the similarities and differences among them. This will be the initial stage in the formulation of your thesis.

5. Form a thesis that is clearly written and can be logically supported by the literature you will include in your review.

6. View the articles briefly again and jot down any notes that seem to relate to your thesis.

7. Decide which organizational pattern and format are best for the topic of your review.

8. Construct an appropriate outline for the literature review.

9. Write an introduction that introduces the topic, reveals your thesis statement, and arranges key issues.

10. Organize and write the body of your paper according to the appropriate format: topical or chronological.

11. Write a conclusion that reconciles similarities and differences on the topic and reemphasizes the criteria used to arrive at this conclusion.

12. Complete the final draft of the literature review.



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13. Check over the final draft for grammar and punctuation errors.

14. Use the checklist provided here to make sure that all parts of the literature review are addressed and focused.

Establishing a Critical Response for a Literature Review

You may find this section helpful at **Steps 3, 4** and **5** of the process. When reviewing your sources, explore the following areas to help develop your critical response:

- What is the purpose of the research or work?
- What research or literary methods are used?
- How do the major concepts operate?
- In a research study, how accurate are the measurements?
- In a literary work, is the author's position objective or biased?
- What are the different interpretations of the results of the study or of the literary work itself?

REVIEW

1. What do you consider to be the most crucial step(s) in the process of your literature review? Why? Justify your response(s).

★ Organization ★

A literature review can be arranged either **topically** or **chronologically**.

Topical organization occurs in reviews where previous research being evaluated is divided into segments with each one representing a part of some larger issue. In a topical review, the author begins by describing the characteristics of research shared by several studies and then moves on to analyze their similarities and differences. For more information, see the example below.

Example

The **organization** of a literature review begins in the **introduction**. For example, in the introduction of a literature review about the effect of seating arrangements on peer tutoring communication, you would first introduce the topic and what your literature review will attempt to assess:

...Writing centers can set the table for collaborative tutoring sessions through a careful consideration of spatial arrangement . . .

Then state what angle is going to be explored:

...These studies will be used to support the author's claims that spatial arrangement is instrumental in encouraging collaborative environments in the writing center...

Then, arrange key issues that will be addressed in this review by answering questions that you have personally developed and are tailored to fit your topic. In the introduction, give the audience a clear picture of how you will organize your paper:



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In the following, I¹ first review some relevant research concerning spatial arrangement and then discuss some recommended and alternate seating arrangements to encourage a collaborative environment in the writing center. Finally, I include some other considerations.

In the **body** of this literature review, you would **organize** the information topically around each point (or question) that you asked yourself:

- Research Review
- Recommended Spatial Arrangement
- Alternative Spatial Arrangement
- Other Considerations

Then, write a conclusion that explains the significance of your findings:

...While the seating arrangements outlined above are generally a good 'setting' for peer tutoring sessions, we should remember that each tutoring session is unique. Not all students will be comfortable with a side-by-side spatial arrangement at a round table. Tutors should be perceptive of and receptive to students who may have other spatial needs...

Chronological organization occurs when a review is organized in time order and is most often used when a historical context is needed for discussing a topic from its beginning to its current state; chronological organization is especially helpful when discussing inactive periods and shifts in perspective on a given topic.

Example

The **organization** of a literature review begins in the **introduction**. For example, in the introduction of a literature review entitled Development of Social Science Research on Attitudes Towards Gender in America, you would first introduce the topic and what your review hopes to assess:

...This literature review will assess the development of research designed to uncover gender attitudes in America during the latter part of the 20th Century...

Then state what angle is going to be explored:

..As research progressed throughout the 20th century, the methods that social scientists use for measuring these attitudes developed and changed as well...

Then, chronologically arrange issues that will be addressed in this review:

Gender stereotypes still exist today, and varying attitudes can be traced over the past fifty years. Survey instruments used to gather data on these varying attitudes have also changed drastically over the course of time.

In the **body** of this literature review, you would organize the information chronologically, addressing each point (or question) that is being asked for a particular time period:

- Stereotypes and Survey Instruments of the 1950's
- Stereotypes and Survey Instruments of the 1960's
- Stereotypes and Survey Instruments of the 1970's
- Stereotypes and Survey Instruments of the 1980's
- Stereotypes and Survey Instruments of the 1990's
- Current Advancements

¹ Always clear the use of *I* with your instructor. An alternative to this would be the use of third person wording, such as "This paper reviews some relevant research concerning spatial arrangement and then discusses some recommended and alternate seating arrangements to encourage a collaborative environment in the writing center."



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Then, write a conclusion that explains the significance of your findings:

Although the survey instruments used in the 1950's and 1960's developed an obvious bias when surveying Americans regarding gender attitudes, the 1970's brought about great change. Today social scientists are more careful than ever about testing the quality of a survey instrument before using it on the general public.

★ Format ★

There are also two suggested formats for composing your literature review. **Format A** is used when comparing several studies that have similar hypothesis but different findings. Each piece of research is summarized individually. Format A is good for reviews with a small number of entries; however, this format may confuse the audience when used with a large number of reviews because descriptions of so many studies may get in the way of the analysis. Keep in mind that each piece of research usually will not receive equal attention in the review.

Format A Outline

I. Introduction consists of four parts that are usually discussed in one paragraph.

- a. **Identify** the general topic being discussed.
- b. **Mention trends** published about the topic.
- c. **State thesis** establishing the reason for writing the literature review.
- d. **Explain criteria** by giving a description of each of the criteria used in evaluating the literature review and rationalizing its organization

II. Literature reviewed section is divided up according to study.

- a. **First study** is summarized and discussed.
- b. **Second study** is summarized and discussed.
- c. **Third study** is summarized and discussed.

III. Comparative analysis acknowledges the similarities and differences between studies.

- a. **Similarities** (if any) among the studies are evaluated and discussed.
- b. **Differences** (if any) among the studies are evaluated and discussed.

IV. Conclusion/Summary effectively wraps up the review.

- a. **Summarize** points of comparison or contrast among the works based on Section III of your review.
- b. **Provide insight** of relationship between the topic of the review and a larger area of study such as a specific discipline or profession

Format B organizes the literature review *according to similarities and differences among research rather than by literature studied*. In a review organized according to Format B, little background information on the literature being reviewed is given outright. Instead, it is worked into the body paragraphs of the sections on similarities and differences. The conclusion then uses these two sections (similarities and differences) to tie in points of comparison and contrast between the works. Format B better suits papers that are topically organized. Format B is outlined below.



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Format B Outline

I. Introduction consists of four parts usually discussed in one paragraph.

- a. Identify** the general topic being discussed.
- b. Mention trends** published about the topic.
- c. State thesis** establishing the reason for writing the literature review.
- d. Explain criteria** by giving a description of each of the criteria used in evaluating the literature review and rationalizing its organization

II. Similarities within the research are discussed.

- a. First similarity** among research is discussed.
- b. Second similarity** among research is discussed.
- c. Third similarity** among research is discussed.

III. Differences in the research are discussed.

- a. First difference** between research is discussed
- b. Second difference** between research is discussed
- c. Third difference** between research is discussed

IV. Conclusion/Summary

- a. Summarize** points of comparison or contrast between the works.
- b. Provide insight** into relationship between the topic of the literature and a larger area of study such as a specific discipline or profession.

The most important thing to remember when organizing a literature review is that it is not a list summarizing one work after another. The review should be organized into sections according to theme that are set apart by subject-related headings.

REVIEW

1. Which format have you chosen for your literature review? Why?

★ **A Literature Review Checklist:** ★
Did I ?

- Establish a valid thesis based on the examined research
- State this thesis clearly in my introduction
- Define unfamiliar terms
- Incorporate background information to define the problem
- Begin each entry in the review with a complete bibliographical reference
- List and describe the hypothesis/thesis in each work reviewed



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- Describe the outcome of the work or the research
- Develop and incorporate my own comments, including response to the research, similarities and differences among literature reviewed, and reservations regarding author's methods or conclusions
- Avoid overquoting
- Check for grammar and punctuation errors
- Correctly cite all references in uniform documentation style

★ Resources ★

- Brightwell, G. and Shaw, J. (1997-98). *Writing up research*. Retrieved August 20, 2002 from Languages and Educational Development at the Asian Institute of Technology's Web page at <http://www.languages.ait.ac.th/EL21OPEN.HTM>
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- The University of Wisconsin-Madison Writing Center. (2001). *Academic writing: Reviews of literature*. Retrieved May 30, 2002 from <http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/ReviewofLiterature.html>

*In traditional APA style, this section would be entitled "References" and would be listed on a separate page double-spaced. Due to space constraints in this packet, it has been formatted differently.

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