

INTRODUCTION TO LITERATURE REVIEWS

The idea of “literature” usually conjures up images of dusty books that you are required to read for English, American, or World literature classes. The “literature” in a **literature review**, however, refers to all the previous research and scholarship on a particular topic, no matter what discipline you are studying; the “review” is your explanation of what the literature says.

A literature review is the *synthesis* of the available literature regarding your research topic. This synthesis merges the conclusions of many different sources to explain the overall understanding of the topic, thus laying a foundation for both the research question and primary research. Although a literature review will cite sources and should discuss the credibility of the sources included, it is more than an annotated bibliography. Your literature review needs to review all the significant sources on a topic, regardless of whether or not they support the claims you will eventually be working toward.

Your literature review, like any other document, should contain an **introduction**, a **body**, and a **conclusion**.

Introduction

Your introduction should clearly explain the overall research topic and the depth of the information to be presented; it often also explains the types of sources that will be used. If your literature review is part of a larger research proposal or project, its introduction can be combined with the introduction of your paper.

Body

The body of your literature review is intended to give your audience an overview of the already-available research on your topic. This can serve several purposes, including:

- Establishing your credibility as an informed researcher
- Illustrating the importance of a particular problem in a field
- Identifying a gap in the knowledge of a particular subject
- Defining key terms and ideas that are used in a particular field
- Explaining research methods commonly used in a discipline
- Identifying potential problems with possible research methods
- Directing the reader toward the research question

Unlike the body of an essay or research paper, the body of a literature review is not intended to directly support a thesis, unless this approach is specifically assigned. Instead, it provides the reader with the background information needed before moving into further study or research. Generally speaking, the overall purpose of a literature review is to establish a framework for further discussion. Present each piece of literature using a **claim**, **evidence**, and **discussion**, but explain general information rather than arguing specifically in support of your thesis.

1. The **claim** needs to tie into the overall purpose that the literature review relays. This may tie into one of the modes of thought, such as comparison and contrast or cause and effect.
2. The **evidence** needs to be properly cited information from reliable sources that are relevant to the topic and consists of the information given within the sources that you are reviewing.
3. The **discussion** needs to show how the sources support the specific claim being made. The discussion should also put the information into a context that reflects your intended purpose.

A literature review should not simply list the relevant sources; that is the purpose of an annotated bibliography. Coherent structure is important. The general information needs to work toward some overall framework. Outlining the sources that you will present can help to provide a structure that will direct your audience toward the research topic.

Conclusion

Depending on the purpose(s) of your literature review, your conclusion may include the following:

- *Introduction to further research:* The conclusion of your literature review can be used to explain your intended research question.
- *Summary of theories:* Your conclusion can summarize central theories and ideas that give your reader a better understanding of the topic.
- *Discussion of the gap:* If your literature review has revealed a gap in general understanding, your conclusion can explain the significance of that gap.

Regardless of what your literature review includes, it will always explain what you learned and how this affects your understanding of the various problems or questions within the field. A conclusion should not spend time reiterating the sources already discussed; most of it should focus on presenting the general consensus gleaned from the sources provided.

Organizing the sources in the body of a Literature Review

Organizing a literature review requires you to order your sources according to a progression of ideas and content. Usually, good organization will follow one or more of the patterns of the *Modes of Thought*, the ways of writing and organizing your paper:

- Comparison and Contrast
- Cause and Effect
- Problem and Solution
- Process
- Description
- Illustration
- Classification
- Division
- Narrative

Do any of your sources discuss causes or effects? Do they reveal problems in a field or list solutions? Do they provide illustrations of the topic? Do they define complex theories or ideas? Depending on the way you choose to organize your review, you may end up using different sources multiple times.

It can often be useful to create an outline that contains the plan for organizing your sources before you begin writing. Most strategies for outlining essays or research papers will work just as well for literature reviews.

Review what each of your sources say about the issues that the literature review is exploring. Present them in a way that relates to the overall purpose of your literature review. Ask yourself some of these questions to help review and organize your sources:

- Which sources provide general, background, or historical information?
- Do your sources explain the gaps in your literature, or is that your conclusion?
- How well do the sources agree on evidence, claims, and methodology?
- Which sources directly influence your research question?
- Do you agree with the established understanding in the field, or do you plan to propose a new understanding?

You will need to include all of the available sources that deal with your topic, including sources that present an opposing viewpoint. It is often helpful to place the most relevant and agreeable sources close to the end; this will lead your reader to your point more easily. Grouping similar sources together can keep the audience from becoming confused.

Source Integration

Literature reviews should make distinctions between the pieces of general information you are trying to

convey and the sources that explain that general information. **You must state your understanding of the topic based on the knowledge you have gained from reading the literature.**

Ordinarily, **source integration** can include quoting, summarizing, paraphrasing, and synthesizing. In a literature review, however, quotations and paraphrases should be avoided; you are conveying the overall conclusions of the available literature, not picking individual points to use as evidence. Introduce or signal each source as you integrate it. Depending on the style you are using, you may need to include additional information in a parenthetical citation. Parenthetical citations should come after your summary of the source.

It is not enough to just state your understanding of the general information and provide a summary of the sources. It is necessary to **discuss the summaries** and how they relate to the general trend or framework you are communicating. Continue this process with other ideas that you would like to convey. Make sure to connect paragraphs together through logical transitions in your topic sentences.

Remember, if you are still confused, you can always find other literature reviews in your area of interest. They can provide insight on different ways to organize your literature review. Also, try asking your professor about his or her experience writing literature reviews. Your professor will have good advice about how to start your review and where to look for information.

Sources Consulted

“Learn how to write a review of literature.” The Writing Center @ the University of Wisconsin – Madison. <http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/ReviewofLiterature.html> (accessed July 29, 2011).