

Writing a Literature Review Paper

1. Your first question when assigned a literature review paper may be “what is it?”
2. First, let’s look at what a literature review is not.
 - a. It’s not an annotated bibliography. This is simply a list of resources followed by a brief description.
 - b. It’s not a literary review. This is a critique of one specific work, such as a play or a poem.
 - c. It’s not a book review. This is an exploration of the strengths and weaknesses of a particular book.
 - d. And it’s not the section of your research paper that examines previously published literature on your topic.
3. A literature review paper synthesizes the key theories and results in a field of study. It describes, evaluates and critiques a large number of resources, then demonstrates how work in that area evolved and discusses the influences that made a difference.
4. Literature reviews vary somewhat between disciplines. This tutorial uses examples from several areas of study and examines those points that are common to all reviews.
5. There are several stages to writing a literature review:
 - a. select your topic;
 - b. select and read your sources;
 - c. write your review.
6. Perhaps the most important step in this process is selecting your research topic.
7. A good research topic focuses on a subject that has been well explored. That is, one where you can find articles that reflect growth and change in an area of research.
8. Your topic needs to be narrow and focused. For example, rather than looking at language production in early childhood, research the production of passive constructions in English-speaking children. You could narrow the topic even further by looking at only those children ages 4-6.
9. Most importantly, your topic needs to be one that interests you. You’ll be spending a lot of time reading and thinking about this subject. Make sure it’s one that holds your attention.

10. To give your topic the focus it needs, explore the articles available by doing a quick search in a database specific to your field.
11. For example, PsycInfo for articles on psychology or PubMed for articles on health topics.
12. The best way to find a good database is to explore the appropriate research guide at the library website, library.sjsu.edu.
13. Here you'll find a subject guide on every discipline taught at San Jose State. And each guide includes a list of databases recommended by the subject specialist librarian.
14. Once you choose a database, enter your topic and run a search.
15. To create your search, think about your topic and the words that best describe it. These are your **keywords**.
16. For example, if you're researching the devices used to sense that an automobile driver is beginning to fall asleep behind the wheel, your keywords are going to be "drowsiness," "driver," "detection."
17. If your search pulls up thousands of results, this means you need to narrow your topic some more.
18. Often databases will suggest ways to focus your topic by providing lists of subtopics. Each click on these will narrow your results further.
19. You can also narrow your topic by limiting your subject to a particular time period, geographic area, population or person. For example, rather than researching "terrorism" instead focus on "terrorism in Chechnya in the late 20th century and its impact on youth."
20. If you've tried all these techniques and still don't have a workable topic, ask your professor for help.
21. Once you've settled on a topic, the next step is to choose which resources to review. When looking at articles, read the abstract first. This short synopsis will give you an idea of the article's content and whether it fits your topic.
22. If the abstract looks good, open up the article and read the Conclusion section. If it also looks interesting, put the article in your "to read" pile.
23. As you start collecting articles, books and reports, it's helpful to categorize them by the methods they use, the arguments they make or any other classification that works for you.

24. So far, you've been scanning material and making your initial selections. Now it's time to read them thoroughly. As you do, look for issues that arise, differences in theories and approaches, and how the author has contributed to your field of study.
25. Begin taking clear and consistent notes, including all of the citation information you will need:
 - a. author,
 - b. title,
 - c. date created,
 - d. source (this can be a journal name or URL), and
 - e. page numbers, if it's a print item.
26. How you keep track of your notes is up to you. You can use index cards, a notebook, RefWorks, your iPhone, or a Word document. If you do use RefWorks, remember that you can add your own notes to the article records.
27. It's a good idea to read the simplest articles first. This will give you the vocabulary you need and help you understand the more challenging articles in your collection. Give yourself time to understand each article. If you're confused, it's going to be reflected in your paper.
28. Now, it's time to write. A literature review has three main sections:
 - a. the introduction;
 - b. the body, and
 - c. the conclusion.
29. In your introduction, define or identify the general topic, issue, or area of concern. That is, provide a context for why you're reviewing the literature.
30. Then, depending on your topic, you can point out
 - a. overall trends in what has been published about the topic; or
 - b. conflicts in theory, methodology, evidence, and conclusions; or
 - c. gaps in research and scholarship; or
 - d. a single problem or new perspective of immediate interest.
31. Finally,
 - a. establish your reason for reviewing the literature.

- b. Explain the criteria you used in analyzing the literature and how you organized the review.
 - c. And, when necessary, state why certain literature is or is not included.
- 32. The body of your paper can follow several possible organizing principles:
 - a. chronological,
 - b. thematic,
 - c. methodological.
- 33. Organizing your sources chronologically means showing how your area of study evolved over time. Take a moment to read the sample topic below.

"A review of the literature **of the past fifty years** shows research on the motivation behind terrorist acts shifting focus from the psychological to the political and now the religious."
- 34. Thematic literature reviews are organized around a particular topic or issue. Read the example below.

"While a review of the literature suggests some consensus among researchers regarding the psychological state of most terrorists immediately preceding the commission of a terrorist act, there appears to be little agreement regarding **the psychological profile of potential terrorists.**"
- 35. A methodological approach focuses on the approach the authors take to the subject.

"In the effort to understand political extremism, **researchers have taken various approaches.** Some have surveyed vast libraries of historical literature; others have sifted through stores of church and government data; still others have used the ethnographer's tools of first-hand interview and observation."
- 36. Once you've decided on your organizing principle, demonstrate how the articles you've chosen follow this approach.
- 37. Remember that you are analyzing and synthesizing the articles you've read. Your paper should not be merely a list of summaries. Each paragraph should address a concept, not an author.
- 38. For the conclusion of your paper:
 - a. summarize major contributions of significant studies and articles to the body of knowledge under review;

- b. point out major methodological flaws or gaps in research, inconsistencies in theory and findings, and areas or issues pertinent to future study;
 - c. conclude by providing some insight into the relationship between the central topic of the literature review and a larger area of study, such as a discipline, a scientific endeavor, or a profession.
39. To see an example of a literature review, go to
http://faculty.mwsu.edu/psychology/Laura.Spiller/Experimental/sample_apa_style_litreview.pdf
40. Good luck with your paper!

Material adapted from:

The University of Washington: Writing a Psychology Literature Review:
<http://web.psych.washington.edu/writingcenter/writingguides/pdf/litrev.pdf>

The University of Wisconsin, Madison: Review of Literature (©2009) at
<http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/ReviewofLiterature.html>

Prof. Roxanne Cnudde's Communications 100W handout, Writing a Literature Review

Engineering Literature Review, ©2007, San Jose State University,
<http://tutorials.sjlibrary.org/tutorial/engineering/index.htm>