What is a literature review?

A literature review is not to be confused with a book review. It surveys scholarly articles, books, journal articles and other sources (for example, dissertations or conference papers) relevant to a particular subject, theory or area of research and provides a description, summary, and critical evaluation of each work.

It is not a review of what has been said, but an analytical synthesis of sources that have contributed to your research. You must show awareness of the differing arguments and theories. By reviewing the literature of your subject, you will become familiar with differing methods and perspectives.

If you read any academic book or article, you will find an example of a literature review in the introduction.

What is the purpose of a literature review?

The purpose is to demonstrate your knowledge of the significant literature within your topic and to have critically evaluated it.

A literature review:

- Identifies areas of prior scholarship to set your subject in the context of previous studies.
- Places each work in the context of its contribution to knowledge of the subject under review.
- Describes how each study relates to the other.
- Identifies gaps in previous research and emphasises new ways to interpret the subject.
- Proposes areas for further research.

How do I write a literature review?

A good literature review is critical (without criticising) of the literature significant to the subject. It raises questions and highlights areas which need further research. You will need to have narrowed down your topic before you write the literature review and have a title.
Structuring your review

The literature review is not a shopping list. You should not write about one author, followed by another and then another. Instead, structure it into themes according to your thesis. You would then relate it to your own topic.

What texts do I include?

You do not need to include everything that you have read. Select the key theorists that have written about your subject, or different areas within your subject, and group them into themes which will provide your structure. Include any canonical texts first, as this will show that you have read these texts, and then develop your thesis by reading beyond them. You do not need to discuss every theory written by each writer - just include the theories relevant to your subject.

What does a literature review entail?

- Introduction: an overview of the subject, issue or theory under consideration.
- Organise your review: group authors who draw similar conclusions and then compare and contrast different authors' views on an issue.
- Be critical: note areas in which authors are in disagreement. You need to consider each author's arguments and how they support this with evidence (for example, case studies, narratives or statistics). Ask yourself if the author is objective. Are they biased? Has information been ignored?
- Link your own arguments into your critical analysis and use quotes if needed. Less is more in a literature review. Remember to cite references accurately using the UCA Harvard system.
- Relate your own study to previous studies. Show how your study fits in with the reviewed literature and identify gaps in research.
- What is your conclusion? Which arguments are the most convincing and why, and which make the greatest contribution to the understanding and development of this subject?

Using academic language

- Use academic language which is formal, cautious and grammatically correct.
- Academic writing uses the passive voice ('it was found that...'), opposed to the more personal active voice ('I find that...').
- You should use logical reasoning.
- Do not use slang or words such as 'actually' or 'basically'.

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You should avoid using first person ('I', 'me', 'my', 'we' or 'our').

An example of an academic literature review accessed through JSTOR


Article URL: jstor.org/stable/463823

This example demonstrates a way of organising a literature review. It groups similar theories and evaluates the main points while relating them to the author's own argument.