

A literature review is an essential part of academic writing, especially in research-based papers. Literature reviews are often a part of a larger research project or paper but can also function independently as a standalone assignment. This handout provides a brief overview of the literature review genre, as well as some basic tips for writing a literature review; however, remember to always write with your audience or assignment in mind.

Purpose of a Literature Review

A literature review synthesizes relevant academic work by analyzing and evaluating existing scholarship related to your research topic. Its main purpose is to provide a critical overview of the research on a specific subject—highlighting key arguments, debates, and gaps in the literature—while identifying patterns, themes, emerging trends, and areas requiring further exploration. **In a literature review, the word “literature” refers to all the scholarly writings on a specific topic.** By situating your research within the existing body of work, a literature review demonstrates your understanding of the field and justifies why your research is important.

Developing Your Literature Review

Developing your literature review requires an effective research and writing process. The following sections outline steps you should take when drafting your review.

Select & Narrow Your Research Topic

Identify the focus of your research by narrowing your topic and developing a specific research question. A narrowed topic and research question will guide your work and help you identify relevant literature. Instead of reviewing everything about the topic, your literature review will primarily include research directly related to your chosen topic.

Search for Relevant Sources

Conduct thorough research using academic databases, books, peer-reviewed journals, and other sources appropriate for your topic. Make sure to focus on reliable and scholarly sources. As you gather materials, note down important details such as the authors, publication dates, and key points. Evaluate your potential sources to ensure they are credible, current, and pertinent to your topic.

As you research, identify foundational works and theories. Your sources will reference works that defined the field or changed it dramatically. Even if these foundational works are less current, it is important to familiarize yourself with them and learn how they affected the overall conversation surrounding your topic. As you do, you will learn how both old and new ideas influence modern work in the field.

Organize Your Review

A well-organized literature review flows logically. Consider how the sources relate to each other. Common ways to structure your literature review include organizing your research

- **Thematically (Most Common):** Organize by topic or issue, allowing for comparative analysis of perspectives, methods, and research gaps.
- **Chronologically:** Arrange by publication date to show how the scholarly conversation has progressed.
- **Methodologically:** Structure based on the research methods used in the studies cited.

Each of these structures has its own way of highlighting connections and distinctions between studies.

Synthesize, Don't Summarize

Rather than summarizing studies one by one, synthesize the information. Synthesis means positioning different sources in conversation with each other and exploring how they agree or disagree with one another. In your literature review, discuss how different sources relate to each other, where they agree or differ, and how they contribute to your research question. You should be weaving the literature together to create a narrative, showing how your research fits into the larger scholarly conversation. As you write, maintain an objective tone. The goal is to present a balanced view of the literature, not to argue for or against a particular perspective.

Synthesis Example: Collectively, these sources about developing a healthy life balance indicate the need for effective strategies to avoid burnout or stress (Diaz, 2022; Jones, 2023; Xu, 2025). Regarding specific solutions, Diaz (2022) and Jones (2023) focus on independent, personal strategies like time management and self-care, whereas Xu (2025) focuses more on external, collaborative strategies.

Identify Gaps in the Literature

A key element of a good literature review is identifying gaps or areas that need further research. By doing this, you position your work as a valuable addition to the field. As you read through your sources, ask yourself: Where do these sources agree and/or disagree? Is there a perspective scholars have not considered or a connection between sources that has not yet been discussed? What fresh perspective or angle can you bring to the overall scholarly conversation about your topic?

Conclude by Summarizing the Key Insights

After synthesizing the existing research, summarize the major themes, controversies, or findings. Explain how these insights have shaped your own research and outline how your work shapes your understanding of or will contribute to the ongoing discussion. If your literature review is part of a larger project, your conclusion will serve as a launching point into your argument.

Tips and Resources

- For help with research, consider meeting with a research librarian.
- Literature reviews require you to keep track of many different sources. Some students find citation managers to be helpful. These allow you to save, organize, annotate, and cite your research. Make sure to always double-check that your citations have been formatted correctly.
- If you are unsure where to begin or have specific questions about your assignment, make an appointment with your professor to review expectations and brainstorm ideas.
- Literature reviews can vary by form and name depending on the discipline (for example, in history, the literature review will be called a historiography).