

How to write a literature review

What is a literature review?

A literature review is an examination of the published information about a topic. In general, a literature review focuses on scholarly articles, books and relevant sources that describe the ideas, theories, and other studies that have been conducted in a particular area.

How is a literature review different from a research paper?

The primary goal of research papers is to advance the knowledge in a specific area, usually by developing a new argument or hypothesis. Research papers can also include a literature review as one of its parts, in order to support a new idea. On the other hand, literature reviews focus on summarizing and synthesizing information that has already been published. It can include a critical evaluation of each work, but it doesn't focus on adding new ideas to a subject area.

How is a literature review different from an annotated bibliography?

A literature review provides an overview of a particular topic, summarizing and synthesizing information from several sources. Its structure follows the flow of ideas in the text, and you may find several sources cited within one paragraph. An annotated bibliography is a list of citations usually in alphabetical order, and each citation is followed by a brief description and evaluation (annotation).

How to write a literature review?

Planning your review

1. Define and narrow a topic. Try to answer these questions: what is being examined? What issues will be covered with this review? What thesis, problem or question the literature review helps to clarify? What are your objectives with this literature review?
2. Find sources about the topic: identify sources that relate to your thesis, problem, or question.
3. Evaluate the sources: which ones make a significant contribution to your topic area and the investigation in progress? Why?

Writing a review

1. Start by giving a brief description of your central theme, its main issues, and your objectives with this review. This is your introduction.
2. Organize the body of your review into categories. For example, begin by analyzing the sources that share similar ideas, and then write a separate section about the sources that oppose or offer alternative interpretations. Depending on your topic, this organization can also be by date of publication of each source (chronological) or according to the methods used by each author (methodological).

3. Summarize and synthesize your sources. Keep your own voice by explaining the ideas presented by the authors, how those ideas were developed, their strengths and weaknesses, and how they relate to other sources.

4. Write a conclusion: what have you drawn from the literature review? What would you recommend for further research?

Useful tips

- Use the [Evaluating Sources of Information](#) handout for selecting and evaluating sources.
- Use the [Discovery Search](#) on the library main page to start your search and visit the [Subject Guides](#) to select specific databases for a particular topic or discipline.
- Try to find other literature reviews for reference. When searching on the databases, type in *your topic* AND *literature review* in the search box. For example, use *diabetes* AND *"literature review"* (with quotation marks) to search for literature reviews about diabetes.
- Databases like APA PsychArticles and APA PsychInfo include Literature Review as a special limiter in the Advanced Search mode (under Methodology). Use this option to search for literature review articles only.
- If searching on Google or Google Scholar, type in *your topic "literature review"* in the search box. For example, type in *autism "literature review"* (with quotation marks) to retrieve literature reviews about autism.

Works consulted for this handout

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<http://guides.library.ucsc.edu/write-a-literature-review>

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