

# Literature Reviews: A Guide

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The purpose of a literature review is to, as the name suggests, “review” the literature surrounding a certain topic area. The word “literature” means “sources of information” or “research.” The literature will inform you about the research that has already been conducted on your chosen subject. If you are going to propose your own study, as when writing a thesis, dissertation, or research proposal, your literature review must be relevant to the work you plan to do.

A literature review is NOT an annotated bibliography. You will not start a new section each time you talk about a new work. Several works can and probably will be mentioned in the same paragraph. While an annotated bibliography only demonstrates how particular sources will be used in a study, a literature review also shows how the sources interact with each other.

At the end of your literature review, you will provide a works cited, bibliography, or references page. The format will depend on your field.

Tasks you may want to accomplish in your literature review:

- Show where you think previous research has left gaps
- Distinguish various theoretical strains, and specify which theory your work will be in line with, if you are proposing a study.
- Define terms that will be important for your study, if you will be proposing.

While specific requirements may differ depending on your discipline, professor, and assignment, there are some general guidelines that usually apply. As with any assignment, **always check with your professor** for your own specific requirements.

A few general rules:

- Do not procrastinate! Start working as early as possible.
- Literature reviews almost always require scholarly, peer-reviewed sources (often articles from peer-reviewed, academic journals).
- There are two kinds of research articles: Empirical and Review.
- Empirical articles describe **original** research. This means that there is a clearly labeled “*methods*” section, “*results*” section, and “*discussion*” section, containing an original research study that contributes to the field. These articles will almost always also include a literature review before discussing the research study, illustrating how the study will contribute to previous research.
- Review articles are essentially peer-reviewed, scholarly literature reviews. They examine many empirical studies and synthesize them into a current “review” of the topic. It may

be helpful to read these types of articles when writing your own literature review to see how they are structured.

### **Reviewing the literature**

When reading through your sources, you want to remember that you are looking for the “big picture,” not a collection of random, separate articles. You are looking for **common themes and patterns** in the research as a whole.

You are also looking for gaps—which areas of your topic are still in need of further research? (Usually this can be found in the very last section of academic journal articles, labeled “future research”)

Also ask yourself, are there any research studies in this area that contradict each other? (Usually there are, so be sure to look for these!)

A helpful way to find common themes and patterns in your research is to write out a brief paragraph on each article or source that you read. Always begin by writing the last names of the author(s) and the date, so that you can easily find this information again (be sure to save your articles in a folder if you are reading through a University online journal database, such as Ebscohost). Then, after you read the article or source, write out your summary. It may be helpful to use bullet points, numbered lists, or whatever you feel like using to help you record what you read. Your paragraph can be as long or short as you want it to be, but it should not ever be more than a page. Sometimes you may find you only need a few sentences.

- If the article is empirical, write down the results of the research study in one or two sentences of your own words. An example would be, “Individuals who lived in Location A were more likely to be dog owners than individuals who lived in Location B.” This is a solid sentence that informs us of the main point of the research study.
- If the article is a review, also look for the main point. It may be helpful to read or skim the whole article, look away, and ask yourself what you felt was the main idea.
- Other information you may want to include in your paragraph: any limitations or gaps you noticed, anything that seems to contradict something you read elsewhere, or just anything that you think is important or interesting.
- If the article is empirical, it is also a good idea to write down the methods that were used, the research design, the number of participants, and the type of population.
- Sometimes, you may even want to write down the names of the statistical procedures used to analyze the data or even some of the statistics, depending on your assignment.

The number of sources you will need will depend upon your assignment, professor, and level of study. In general, undergraduate students will usually be required to use somewhere between 5 and 20 sources; graduate students typically will need between 20 and 40. However, the number can vary greatly, so **always read your requirements and ask your professor.**

After you have read your sources and written your paragraphs, you will probably have a general idea of what the literature says. However, it can be difficult to see common themes when you have a lot of sources. At this point, it is helpful to go through your paragraphs and try to group them according to theme or idea. For example, imagine your general topic is dog ownership in North America. You may find that you have three research studies that all had the same finding, such as “Individuals who lived in Location A were more likely to be dog owners than individuals who lived in Location B.” You may also have three other studies that also had a different finding, such as “Individuals who lived in the South appeared to have more multiple dog households than those who lived in the North.”

This process can be difficult, so once again it is important to remember to start working as early as possible. At this point, you will want to spend a lot of time with your literature, looking for themes, patterns, and ideas, as well as contradictions and gaps.

If you wrote out your paragraphs by hand, it can be helpful to use highlighters or markers to color-code your groupings and make categories. For example, you could use one color to represent one theme or common finding, and a different color for another theme or finding, etc. and leave a marking by each paragraph. Some paragraphs may have multiple markings because you find that they address multiple ideas.

If you don't want to use colors, you could always simply write out the themes and ideas you noticed. Use whatever system works for you. However you do it, it is most important to spend time with your literature, think critically, and look for commonalities and gaps so that you can integrate the information into a whole.

### **Writing the literature review**

Most literature reviews begin with an introduction. Some disciplines will require you to label your introduction with a heading of “Introduction.” However, some disciplines such as APA do not want you to label it, so be familiar with your own formatting style. Also, as always, be familiar with your professors' preferences.

### **Three parts**

1. **Introduction:** Defend the importance of the topic. Give a broad overview of the scope of the work you are reviewing. Clarify whether you're looking at the entire history of the field, or just a particular period of time.
2. **Body:** Summarize the works you are reviewing. Just as in any written assignment, use logical organization and clear transitions. Spend more time on the people and works that are considered most important in the field and/or that are most relevant.
3. **Conclusion:** Predict where research in the field will go next. If you are proposing your own research study, show how you will contribute to the field. The conclusion would also be a good place to defend the importance of the topic, now that you have demonstrated the current state of thinking in the field.