

LITERATURE REVIEWS

A style guide for writing a literature review

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What is it?

A basic definition of a literature review is: **A piece of writing, either as part of a larger research paper or as a standalone work, that provides a summary and synthesis of key sources on a particular topic.** A literature review often appears as a section of a larger work. It usually appears after the introduction of your paper but before the methods and main body.

Why do we need it?

The purpose of a literature review is to help your readers understand what you found in your research. The idea is to summarize what **others** think about your topic. Some of the questions you want to think about for Literature Reviews are:

- What do people in your field agree on?
- What do they disagree on?
- Where are the gaps in research? What hasn't been done yet?
- What information will set the stage for your research question and theoretical framework?

What does a Literature Review look like?

A literature review is like a miniature paper at the beginning of the research that has its own Introduction, Body, and Conclusion before you move on to the main body of the larger work. So, separate from your Research Introduction and Body, a Lit Review outline would look something like this:

Introduction:

- Explain your topic and thesis in general terms
- Forecast/signpost the key researchers and ideas you will talk about in the lit review.

Body:

- Provide a summary of your resources.
- Make sure you synthesize them as well as summarize.
- Discuss the significance of the research, point out research gaps.
- Discuss strengths and weaknesses of sources with an objective position.
- NOTE: A literature review should not be making claims about your thesis.

Conclusion:

- Summarize the key ideas of researchers one last time, especially those that lead into your research question or support your main thesis.
- Make sure you connect back to your research question at the end.

Organization:

There are several ways to organize your resources in a literature review. The only thing that we **don't** want is to write **one paragraph summarizing each resource**. The idea for the Literature Review is to synthesize the research to show how different articles/journals are **in conversation** about your research topic.

Here are some ideas for how to organize your sources to synthesize them properly.

Thematically:

This method focuses on similarities and differences. If resources talk about similar ideas or themes you can group them together in one paragraph. Similarly, if you find a group of resources all disagree, you can talk about the ways they differ on a particular theme in one paragraph. This way no matter how many paragraphs you have, you will be tying together **multiple resources** in each paragraph.

Chronologically:

This strategy seems simple. However, it's important that you still group your resources together. Instead of themes, you can organize them by research breakthroughs or key debates in the history of your field or topic. You can also group by slightly larger periods: resources from the 1800s would group together a lot of researchers as opposed to only looking at resources from 1872.

Methodologically:

If you are working with resources from different disciplines or fields, you can group the resources by their methods or results. For example, you could group your qualitative or quantitative resources (those that study the qualities of a thing vs those that study numbers from surveys) together. Another option would be to group your resources by discipline: historical, scientific, sociological, etc.

The goal is to always have more than one resource per paragraph. It is even possible to use a combination of these organization methods; so long as you summarize, synthesize, and discuss how the resources work with or against one another, you will be on the right track.

Final Checklist

- Have you read, annotated, and understood your resources?
- Are you doing more than just summarizing?
- Have you grouped your resources so that you talk about more than one in each paragraph?
- Do your resources make sense with your topic or research question?
- Do you have an introduction for the literature review that is separate from the main intro of your paper?
- Do you go back to your research question in your literature review conclusion?

Resources:

Purdue Owl. "Writing a Literature Review," Purdue Online Writing Lab. 2021.

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "Literature Reviews," The Writing Center at University of North Carolina. 2021.

The Tutoring &
Writing Center

Olin Library

