

Literature review

A literature review examines and critically evaluates the most relevant, recent and scholarly research on a particular topic. A literature review can stand alone or be part of a larger piece of work, such as a report, research proposal or thesis.

The requirements of a literature review can vary, so check your unit outline or with your educator for the requirements for your particular assessment. Some general guidelines for writing a literature are explained below.

Content

The content of a literature review centres around conveying what knowledge is available on a topic and analysing the material found. Therefore, your literature review needs to:

- identify existing scholarly knowledge on a particular topic
- compare and contrast current research
- evaluate the research by highlighting strengths and weaknesses
- identify problems or gaps in existing knowledge

If the literature review is part of a research project, it will also need to:

- show how your research links to current knowledge
- highlight how your study is attempting to address a gap in the research
- provide a rationale or justification for your study

Tip

Your literature review needs to critically examine the sources, rather than to just simply summarise them.



Structure

A literature review has the same basic structure as an essay: an introduction, a series of body paragraphs, and a conclusion.

The introduction should define the topic, provide an appropriate context for reviewing the literature, and explain the organisation of your literature review.

The information in the body should be organised on the basis of ideas, rather than authors. In other words, the literature should be grouped according to common themes. Ways to find patterns in the literature and group studies meaningfully are suggested on the following page. You may be able to use headings and subheadings to organise your work (check this with your educator).

The conclusion should summarise the major findings of the literature review. The conclusion should also make an evaluative statement about the current literature on the topic, point out major gaps or flaws, and outline areas for future study.

Approaches to organising your literature review

How you choose to organise the information in your literature review will depend on the purpose and requirements the assessment task. Some approaches to presenting information could be:

- Historical approach: Trace the development of ideas on the topic, leading up to the current resolution
- Comparative approach: Give the similarities and differences between major theories, perspectives or findings
- Problem-solution approach: If the topic is posed as a problem, set out possible solutions, and then evaluate each
- Opinion-reason approach: Present the current opinion on a topic, then give reasons and evidence to evaluate them
- Methodological approach: Concentrate on the procedures different researchers have used and explore why similar similar studies produced dissimilar results

Style

The style of language used in a literature review is often evaluative and demonstrates your perspectives of the literature. Evaluative language can be positive/endorsing or negative/less endorsing.

Examples of words with positive evaluative meaning include *important*, *significant*, *necessary*, *crucial* and *effective*. You might also use positive/endorsing phrases such as:

There is strong evidence that.....
Johnson's (2014) study demonstrated.....
This concept is central to.....

Examples of words with negative evaluative meaning include *inconclusive*, *questionable*, *insignificant*, *unclear* and *weak*. Examples of negative/dis-endorsing phrases include:

There is little evidence in support of...
Johnson (2014) claims that.....
This argument does not take into account..

Checklist for your a literature review

- Is the purpose and scope of my literature review clearly identified?
- Is the structure of my review clearly stated?
- Are key terms and concepts defined?
- Is the review focused on the most relevant issues and recent developments and research?
- Have I interpreted and evaluated what I have read?
- Have I demonstrated that I have read widely yet remained focused on the topic?
- Have I identified gap in the research literature and areas for future study?
- Have I grouped ideas and themes clearly?
- Is there a logical flow to my writing?
- Have I acknowledges all sources of information according to APA rules?



Tip

Initially, read broadly on the topic to enhance your understanding of the field. However, remember that the literature review needs to relate to your specific assessment task. Although there may be hundreds of sources of information on a topic, your assignment criteria will help you refine and narrow down the scope of your reading.