

Writing a Literature Review

What is a Literature Review?

A literature review is a form of research documentation that gives a summary of what we know or do not know about a particular issue/ topic/ subject. Literature reviews provide a description, summary, and critical evaluation of published information in a particular subject area. It is not your personal opinion on whether or not you liked these sources. Literature reviews have an organizational pattern that combines both summary and claim/theory.

Core Elements of a Literature Review:

Summary: recap only the important information of the source. State this information in your own words. Include only the main points of the source, significant examples from the source. However, do not change the technical terms. Speak about one source at a time.

Synthesis (claim/theory): re-organize and analyze the information that you have summarized from multiple sources. Relate these sources back to your research focus/thesis/questions. Use logical connections to establish the significance of the sources and relate them to your research theme. While this is to relate to your own focus, the synthesis should not contain any new information – it is a grouping and restating of the ideas of the authors that you have reviewed.

Think About the Contents of the Source:

- The objective or purpose: was it to convince readers, inform readers, etc.
- The main idea: what was the thesis in the source? What was the main information the author wanted readers to take away from their source?
- Strengths & weaknesses: what strengths does the author have to make readers side with them? What weaknesses do they have? Is there any counter-arguments to their information/perspective?
- The findings: what did the author of the source claim to have found? What did their data show? What was their evidence that support their claim or main idea?
- The method: how did the author gather this evidence? Did they survey people? Did they investigate? Did they have any case studies?
- The results: What did they conclude with?

Things to Include in a Literature Review:

- An introduction and a conclusion: this is not just a summary of the sources or a bibliography with explanations. Be sure to introduce your topic of research in a paragraph before you begin discussing your sources.
- A thesis: a thesis is a great starting point to begin your research and understanding the relevance of the source. Be careful that your thesis does not express your own claim/perspective on the topic too broadly and make your literature review more of a persuasive argument. That is not the point of the assignment.



Things to Avoid in a Literature Review:

- Writing in first person: do not use “I” to express your personal view. Keep the explanation of the source unbiased and objective.
- Avoid vague statements: do not use large words or give a general statement, as it is unclear and does not support your statements. Instead, use examples or highlight specific parts of the source that can clearly support your statements.

For example, do not simply state “This source is good” or “This source supports my research focus.” These vague statements do not explain why the source is good or how it supports your research focus.

Instead, explain to your reader the why and how of the source’s significance. By highlighting the main ideas and supporting details of the source, you are already explain how it is a good source to support you. For example, “The large population of over two hundred people surveyed by Dr. Justice and Dr. Research allowed for a wide range of data collection.”

Literature Review or Academic Paper?

The main focus of an academic research paper is to develop a new argument, and a research paper will contain a literature review as one of its parts. In a research paper, you use the literature as a foundation and as support for a new insight that you contribute.

The focus of a literature review, however, is to critically summarize and synthesize the arguments and ideas of others without adding new contributions, including your own. A literature review is done to find support for your research focus, however, the focus of the literature review is to prove why the sources you chose are strong enough to support your research focus.

APA Format:

APA format has several requirements, including a title page and specifically formatted pages.

The title page should include a page number in the top right corner. There should be no information in the footer. The title page should include the title of the assignment in bold, the name of the student, their student number, the name of the institute, the course code and name, the instructor’s name, and the due date. Some instructors prefer that the word count is also included on the title page.

The reference page should be the last page and be titled “References” in bold. The reference list should follow APA standards for citation and should be arranged in alphabetical order by author’s last name. See the JIBC Library for more information on how to create a reference list in APA style.

