



W. L. Adams Center for Writing Research Series

Writing a Literature Review

A literature review summarizes concepts, data, and other evidence-based research on a particular topic to express a certain goal or viewpoint. Writers use the information in the literature review to explain what other scholars in their field have done and to justify the study presented.

Purpose of a Literature Review

- To demonstrate competence in the selection and analysis of sources.
- To offer historical context for a research question or topic.
- To demonstrate an “aerial view” of iconic influential research studies as well as anomalies and outliers.
- To identify limitations or gaps that justify new studies, including your own.
- To contribute to the academic tradition of scholarly conversation with your research community.

Types of Literature Reviews

Traditional Review: Addresses various scholarly contributions and analyzes significant theories, methodologies, and perspectives relevant to a particular topic (Hart, 2018). Researchers in the humanities and social sciences use traditional reviews.

Systematic Review: Uses primary research as evidence to recommend certain practices or to support a particular decision (Hart, 2018). Systematic reviews are common in social sciences, economics, and medicine.

Meta-analysis Review: Draws from related published resources that contain statistics and data from randomized-control trials to come to a clear conclusion (Hart, 2018). Meta-analyses are a type of systematic review often used in the medical field.

Getting Started

- Articulate the specific research question or problem clearly.
- Invest in the appropriate time commitment.
- Use a variety of search methods and terms.
- Choose the highest quality/levels of evidence in your discipline.
- Read critically and systematically.
- Make analytical notes on findings, methods, approaches, and common or contrasting themes.
- Avoid “cherry-picking” only studies that support your thesis.

Components of a Literature Review

Introduction

- Establishes parameters and scope of your topic.
- Forecasts important sources, theories, or terms that you will examine.
- Describes the game plan you created for the literature search.
- Expresses a thesis in terms of literature patterns, i.e. consensus, contradictions, inconclusive findings.

Body Paragraphs

- Blend highest levels of evidence.
- Identify commonalities, similar findings, contradictory findings, and inconclusive findings.
- Provide analytical commentary and evaluative remarks, including identification of limitations of specific studies.

Conclusion

- Offers a brief recapitulation of your key points of analysis.
- Defines and identifies gaps in the research.
- Conveys the implications of the analysis to your own research.

Organization Options

Chronological: Organization is based on the publication date of all documented sources. Use this method when you must discuss sources consecutively (Claxton & Dolan, 2022).

Thematic: Organization is based on themes you identified when analyzing sources. This method is the most common (Claxton & Dolan, 2022).

Methodical: Organization is based on the authors' research methods and the "key findings evident in each researcher's method" (Claxton & Dolan, 2022, p. 37).

Theoretical: Organization is based on theories researchers use to support their studies and analyses (Claxton & Dolan, 2022). Authors who use this organization should clearly articulate other scholars' theories that inform their subject.

Hybrid: Organization is based on any combination of the four options explained above.

References

Claxton, B. & Dolan, C. (2022). *A step-by-step guide to writing a literature review for doctoral research*. Kendall Hunt.

Hart, C. (2018). *Doing a literature review: Releasing the research imagination* (2nd ed.). Sage.

