What is a Literature Review?

Reviewing the research—often termed a ‘literature review’—is a way that a researcher summarizes the state of knowledge on a particular topic. A good literature review is an indispensable part of doing good research. Literature reviews offer insight into what has already been studied, gaps in the existing knowledge base, and ways of framing and carrying out your own project.

• What is a literature review?

A literature review can be just a simple summary of the sources, but it usually has an organizational pattern and combines both summary and synthesis. A summary is a recap of the important information of the source, but a synthesis is a re-organization, or a reshuffling, of that information. It might give a new interpretation of old material or combine new with old interpretations. Or it might trace the intellectual progression of the field, including major debates. And depending on the situation, the literature review may evaluate the sources and advise the reader on the most pertinent or relevant.

• Steps

  o **Suggestion One: Find models.** Look for other literature reviews (synthetic reviews) in your area of interest or in the discipline and read them to get a sense of the types of themes you might want to look for in your own research or ways to organize your review. You can simply put the word “review” in your search engine along with your other topic terms to find articles of this type on the Internet or in an electronic database.

  o **Suggestion Two: How did other researchers organize their literature?** Look at some of the research studies that you’ve read. It’s particularly good to look at the articles that are closely related to your topic. How did the authors organize their research? What were the major themes? Did they group it into categories? And—importantly for you—what perspectives might they be missing? What aspect of the problem do you hope to look at that hasn’t been covered?

  o **Suggestion Three: Narrow your topic.** There are hundreds or even thousands of articles and books on most areas of study. The narrower your topic, the easier it will be to limit the number of sources you need to read in order to get a good survey of the material. You think of your review in telescopic fashion: you’ll want to give the reader a quick general sense of where we are in the world, but then narrow your focus to the particular country, state and locality of your topic.

  o **Suggestion Four: Find a focus.** A literature review, like a term paper, is usually organized around ideas, not the sources themselves as an annotated bibliography would be organized. This means that you will not just simply list your sources and go into detail about each one of them, one at a time. As you read widely, but selectively, in your topic area, consider instead what themes or issues connect your sources together. Do they present one or different solutions? Is there an aspect of the field that is missing? How well do they present the material and do they portray it according to an appropriate theory? Do they reveal a trend in the field? A raging debate? Pick one of these themes to focus the organization of your review.
Suggestion Five: Construct a working thesis statement. Use the focus you’ve found to construct a thesis statement. Your thesis statement will not necessarily argue for a position or an opinion; rather it will argue for a particular perspective on the material. Some sample thesis statements for literature reviews might be:

- Single sex classrooms improve academic outcomes for girls, but the research is mixed on their effect on boys.
- Research demonstrates that tracking is beneficial, but only at lower grade levels and in selected academic subjects.
- Research on student attendance has demonstrated the importance of school climate and culture.

Organizational Strategies. You can group research studies and other types of literature (reviews, theoretical articles, case studies, etc.) according to common denominators such as qualitative versus quantitative approaches, conclusions of authors, specific purpose or objective, chronology, etc. Here are some common ways you can organize your research:

- Chronologically: maybe you organize your literature as a field that developed chronologically. “For example, in the fifties, research found advantages to highly tracked high schools. This changed as more critical research examined the ways that tracking disproportionately affected certain groups, and how tracking limited future educational attainment.” You might discuss different trends in the research, and how they developed over time.

- Thematically: Thematic reviews of literature are organized around a topic or issue, rather than the progression of time. Progression of time may still be an important factor in a thematic review, but more authentic thematic reviews tend to break away from chronological order. Themes might have to do with different aspects of research on parent involvement (its affect on student achievement, future educational attainment, and/or school climate) or with different concepts of parent involvement in the literature (e.g., some researchers emphasize involvement in terms of parents meeting the needs of school staff members, while other researchers are more critical of the “school-centric” model of involvement...).

- Methodologically: A methodological approach differs from the two above in that the focusing factor usually does not have to do with the content of the material. Instead, it focuses on the “methods” of the researcher. These could be qualitative or quantitative; or maybe psychological or sociological kinds of research.

  - Summarize individual studies or articles with as much or as little detail as each merits according to its comparative importance in the literature, remembering that space (length) denotes significance.

  - Provide the reader with strong "umbrella" sentences at beginnings of paragraphs, "signposts" throughout, and brief "so what" summary sentences at intermediate points in the review to aid in understanding comparisons and analyses.
• **So, how does it get us to YOUR study?** An important part of any review is situating and making a case for the necessity and importance of your particular research approach and study. Make sure—throughout and especially in the conclusion of the review—to build such a case. In the conclusion, you might:

  o Summarize major contributions of significant studies and articles to the body of knowledge under review, maintaining the focus established in the introduction.

  o Evaluate the current "state of the art" for the body of knowledge reviewed, pointing out major methodological flaws or gaps in research, inconsistencies in theory and findings, and areas or issues pertinent to future study.

  o Point to how a different theoretical perspective could help us see the problem in a different way. It may be the case, for instance, that one theoretical framework, or a few dominant perspectives, dominate the literature. You might want to point your audience to the necessity of taking a different approach.

Adapted from: [http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/literature_review.html](http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/literature_review.html)