

Literature reviews

A literature review is a critical survey of the academic publications and research on a particular topic. A literature review is often, but not always, part of a larger research project.

The purpose of the literature review in research projects

McMillan and Schumacher (2000) identify five purposes of the literature review. A literature review allows you to:

1. Define the research problem

If it is part of a larger research project, the literature review helps you to identify the parameters of your study. Most research areas are broad: a literature review allows you to identify the key issues within a broad research area so that you can define an area of interest which you might pursue.

2. Establish a conceptual or theoretical framework

Unless you are aware of the work of others, you cannot build upon an established foundation. A literature review can highlight gaps in current thinking and help position your research as part of the bigger picture of emerging knowledge in your chosen field.

3. Avoid unintentional replication of previous studies

Sometimes it is appropriate to replicate a previous study, but this should be done intentionally and for a particular purpose. A literature review helps you to make informed choices about a research topic within a scholarly context.

4. Select methods and measures

The success or failure of previous investigations can provide useful material for you when you are designing your own research methodology. You can assess what has worked before (or not worked) in previous contexts and why. You may be alerted to new methodologies and procedures.

5. Relate findings to previous knowledge and suggest areas for further research

The findings of your own research need to be related back to earlier studies. This places your work and can point to areas that need further investigation. Your thesis is much more a coherent whole if your discussion section draws on and contrasts with your literature review.

Writing a literature review

Scope

When you begin your reading, do not over-read; restrict the size of your reading to allow you to actually get on with the review. Read articles twice: the first time to understand themes and concepts, the second time with a critical eye.

You will be required to know a great deal about the topic (especially for a PhD), but you may not have to write everything you know about it. You may be able to limit the scope of the review to include the current state of the theory as it stands to date.

Critical evaluation

Your literature review should include a critical examination of the material that you have read.

There are many factors that you need to keep in mind when reading a piece of work. Factors such as the sample size, research design, measures used, biases, and extraneous or confounding variables will need to be considered.

Central to critical thinking is the ability to think “outside” a piece of writing, not only understanding the writer’s message, but deciding:

- whether the message is valid or not
- whether the evidence and discussion given supports the message
- how the message fits into the broader context

Examine the strengths and weaknesses of the author’s argument. To do this, you need to consider:

- the reading’s background
- its purpose and overall conclusion (claim)
- the evidence used in the reading (if the reading is based on research, how this research was conducted)
- the logical connections between the claim and the evidence
- its limitations
- how it relates to other sources and research

Literature review structure

The main attribute of a good literature review is that it is well structured. A good place to start is to look at other theses, but make sure that you are looking at a good example of a thesis (your supervisor may recommend a few for you to look at). When examining these pieces of work, try to identify the structure and see how they have linked their ideas together.

The information in the literature review is synthesised or brought together to form a *cohesive* whole. Those who read the review should clearly understand the reasons for selecting your research area or question, its relationship to past work, and the central procedures that have been employed by past investigations. In addition, they should know the weaknesses of past studies and how your research contributes to this field in the advancement of knowledge.

The following is a guide to structuring your literature review based on Newman et al. (1997). It is recommended that the literature review forms one separate chapter of your thesis. This is most common when the research problem is defined early on and remains relatively unchanged. However, if the direction of the study changes due to new research findings, then new literature may need to be included in subsequent sections or chapters. Each sub-section of the suggested review structure will be expanded upon separately.

General background information

This section is most likely the longest section of the thesis. It includes:

- An introduction
- A review of the past and present literature in relation to your research purpose
- Clarification of the purpose of study
- General hypotheses to be tested.

The review begins with an introduction that discusses the topic, key concepts and terms, and describes the scope and organisation of the review. You can use the two-topic format or the funnel format (see Alternative methods below). Both formats include the identification of key topics that will be covered in the review. In addition, these formats guide the way the review is structured, which makes the writing of the task easier because you can focus on writing one section at a time and keep on track with your review topics.

Theory

This section outlines relevant theories that impact your study.

You may find it difficult to find information for this section, especially in new fields of research. Still, even in ground-breaking research, there should be some theoretical foundation upon which your work rests. There may not be a strong link in this case, but it does help if there is some basis for your work, albeit indirect. Whatever topics you include in your review, they must bear *some* relationship to your focus. Though you may not find literature that specifically relates to your topic, you should integrate key points from related studies that to allow you to make inferences and indicate what you expect to happen in your study.

Review of the literature on the instruments

This section is a review of the literature on the instruments or measures you will use as part of your study.

You need to present evidence that supports your choice of instrument over those not chosen. This section should be focused on relevant literature specific to the study. One suggestion is to examine the most current instruments first and work back from there. You need to include reliability and validity estimates and a description of the samples that have received the instrument. When dealing with many variables, it is useful to write a separate section on each variable in the review (Cone & Foster, 2006; Newman et al., 1997).

Summary

The summary is a precis of what has been written about in the chapter. It should not be verbose, or a repetition of the entire contents of that chapter, but rather a succinct account of the current state of knowledge on your topic and the instruments used in the study. In addition, there should be a sense that you have explained the background to your study that endorses the decision you have made to study your topic.

References

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For more information

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If you have a quick question about study skills or academic writing, then they can ask it on the [Academic Q+A forum](#), which can be accessed via the [Academic Support Stream site](#).

2. Consultations

One-to-one consultations with learning advisors and writing consultants are [available online and on campus](#). Consultants can answer your questions about academic writing and study skills or give you feedback on your assignment's structure, focus, paragraph structure, flow, presentation, use of sources, and referencing.

3. Online Writing and Learning Link (OWLL)

Develop your academic writing and study skills with the [Online Writing and Learning Link \(OWLL\)](#) website from Massey University. OWLL includes information on assignment writing, assignment types, referencing, study skills, and exam skills.

4. Pre-reading Service

The [Pre-reading Service](#) is a free service, which gives students an opportunity to send their draft assignment to [CLS consultants](#) for review and advice. Students receive individual written feedback on their assignment's structure, focus, paragraph structure, flow, style, presentation, referencing, and use of sources. The service can be accessed via the [Academic Support Stream site](#).

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