

# HOW TO WRITE A LITERATURE REVIEW

No. 27 in the Writing Center Handout Series

## What is a literature review?

Literature reviews provide background information and situate your research study within a context of previous research projects. Literature reviews are used to clarify

- (1) what information is already known,
- (2) what theoretical frameworks have already been developed, and
- (3) what research has already been done.

Literature reviews can identify gaps in the current research or present areas of disagreement within your field of study. Therefore, your job is both to **describe** and to **evaluate** previous research studies. This requires you to determine the credibility and relevance of the research as well as identify conflicts or gaps in the body of literature on your topic.

## How is a literature review different from a research report?

While research reports present general information on a topic, literature reviews discuss the previous work done in a particular area of research. Literature reviews outline other researchers' work and look at how different people have studied your research question. Literature reviews are used to demonstrate the rationale for study and are more critical of the previous research. Research reports, on the other hand, are the studies themselves. They summarize or describe existing information and give a snapshot of the existing knowledge on a subject. A research report analyzes information more than methodology and attempts to summarize, rather than identify gaps, in that information.

## What are the basic steps for reviewing the literature?

1. Choose an area of research, and develop your research question. This may be the most difficult stage of your research, so allow time to narrow your topic. Start with a sketch of your research question, and expect that it will be modified as your work through the project.
2. Identify sources of information. Talk with professors in your discipline, review work cited lists, see whom other researchers reference in their literature reviews, and search the major professional journals in your field.
3. Read studies and research relevant to your topic. Keep records of what you have read, making notes and documenting important quotes. Look for patterns and disagreements among authors.
4. Develop a meaningful, coherent way to organize the studies. Group the literature into categories, and lay out arguments in an ordered sequence.
5. Write about the literature, explaining what different authors say about your topic. Identify differences and similarities in the research you have studied. Relate the literature review to your research question and show its relevance for your study.

*Now that you understand the purpose of literature reviews, see the back of this handout for tips on writing your own literature review.*

For more information on this topic, see:

Schmidt, D. E. (2000). *Writing in political science: A practical guide*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc.



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## **Seven questions to guide your reading of each source:**

**(these questions can also help revise your literature review)**

1. Does the researcher begin by identifying a specific problem area?
2. Does the researcher establish the importance of the problem area?
3. Is the introduction an essay that logically moves from topic to topic?
4. Has the research provided conceptual definitions of key terms?
5. Has the researcher indicated the basis for factual statements?
6. Do the specific research purposes, questions, or hypotheses logically flow from the introductory material?
7. Overall, is the introduction effective and appropriate?

## **Four questions to help you examine the sources as a body of literature:**

**(these questions will be useful in organizing and writing your review)**

1. What have authors already said about my topic?
2. Are there contradictions, gaps, or inconsistencies in the literature?
3. How do we reconcile different findings in the studies?
4. How would my study contribute to the research on this subject?