
Writing a Literature Review

In a review of the literature, the writer provides an overview of the most important research and scholarship on a specific topic, issue, problem, or question. (In this context, “literature” refers to the important scholarly sources on a specific topic, not fiction, poetry, or drama.) The lit review is often said to provide “a map of the field” or a “sense of the scholarly conversation” on its topic.

Purpose and audience of a review of the literature

Before embarking on a research project that adds to the knowledge on a topic, a researcher needs to learn what is already known about the topic. Why? First, there is little point in duplicating knowledge that already exists. Second, the researcher needs to connect their own work to that of other researchers and scholars who work on the same topic. Third, the researcher may want to identify a “gap” in the existing knowledge, a gap the researcher can fill through conducting their own research. Finally, the researcher wants their audience to become familiar with the existing knowledge on the topic.

The audience for a review of the literature usually comprises members of the writer’s own discipline. These disciplinary colleagues may not be specialists in the specific topic or problem addressed in the lit review, however. The writer should keep this in mind when deciding how thoroughly to define or explain specialized concepts.

Forms of a review of the literature

A lit review may be one section of a longer research article. In this case, the lit review often comes after the introduction and before the methods section of the article. This type of lit review typically ends by identifying a gap in the field’s knowledge and posing a set of research questions that will be addressed in the writer’s study.

Some lit reviews are submitted or published as stand-alone documents. In this case, they often conclude by pointing to limitations in perspective or gaps in knowledge that researchers in field should consider addressing.

In the review of the literature, the writer

- defines and clarifies the topic, issue, problem, or question they are working with
- conveys the current state of knowledge on that topic (etc.) by summarizing the important sources on it *and* identifying connections among the sources, including commonalities and differences
- suggests the next step or steps for expanding the topic, solving the problem, or answering the question

The writer of a lit review develops a question and then looks at how other researchers in published studies have addressed it. The writer determines how each source has addressed the question and then synthesizes (identifies connections among) the sources. These connections may be topics they address in common, approaches they take to solving the problem, stances they adopt on an issue, or other shared themes.

A review of the literature is not a sequence of summaries

The most common error writers make when composing a lit review is to structure it as a series of summaries. After introducing the issue or question, the writer discusses their first source and how that source addresses that

issue or question. Having finished discussing the first source, the writer then moves on to the second source, and so on to the end of the paper. Such a paper does not synthesize the sources, and a lit review requires synthesis.

A lit review should be organized by the topics or themes the sources address. The writer examines their sources, asking, what topics or themes are they discussing? What approaches to the problem are they taking? How are some of their responses to the question similar or different? These topics and themes provide the structure for the lit review.

These are some steps to follow when writing a literature review:

1. Identify and develop a research question/main idea.
 - a. **Example:** Research shows that diversity training often fails in workplaces. In what ways does it fail? What needs to be done to have successful diversity training?
2. Identify the scholarship on your topic and read it critically. Look for the author's main purpose, the points they make, and the conclusions they reach. Consider how those points relate to your issue, problem, or question. Also consider how their points are supported and whether the evidence and reasoning seems strong and persuasive.
3. From your source texts, identify the material that is most relevant to your issue, problem, or question. You can highlight it, paste it into a grid or other document (using quotation marks and page numbers!), or take notes on it. This step reduces the amount of source material you have to work with, which can be overwhelming.
4. From the source material you have identified, look for common topics and themes among the sources. What topics or themes are they discussing? What approaches to the problem are they taking? How are some of their responses to your question similar or different? Based on the topics and themes you see being repeated among sources, outline some main points to address in your review. These points will provide the structure for your paper.
 - a. **Example:** Some key points in the literature on why diversity training programs are not working are 1) organizations are not managing diversity, 2) diversity training is focused on differences and not on the "valuing" of diversity, 3) training programs are not inclusive of the organization's entire workforce.
5. Determine which sources address each of the themes or points you have outlined. You may use a source more than once if it is relevant to more than one point in your outline. Use material from your sources as evidence for your points, bringing together material from multiple sources to show the ways in which various sources have addressed the same or similar points.
6. Determine the order of the points you have identified. Which points should be made before other points? Which order of points tells the best or more logical story?
7. Draft your lit review. Writing tip: in the body of the lit review, launch paragraphs with a statement of the point you want to make using your source or sources. *Then* discuss the source(s). Compare:

The Joint Legislative and Audit Commission produced a 2014 report on the causes of increased tuition in Virginia. The bipartisan commission spend two years analyzing the data and found that the decrease in public funding accounted for over half the increase in tuition over the last ten years.

A major cause of increased tuition is a decrease in public funding. According to the Joint Legislative and Audit Commission (2014), the decrease in Virginia's public funding for higher education accounted for over half the increase in tuition over the last ten years (p. 7). In another study, researchers found....

Using this strategy, you help readers keep your points in mind and allow them to follow the argument you are making or the story you are telling in your lit review.

8. Cite and document sources appropriately. Be sure to introduce the research studies appropriately in your text as well, using a documentation style relevant to your field, e.g. APA, MLA, Chicago, IEEE.

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