

# LITERATURE REVIEWS

## BASIC GUIDELINES FOR WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review is an in-depth critical study of the “literature,” or published material, in a narrowly defined area. Several courses, and often the senior project, incorporate lit reviews, with the aim of developing critical thinking skills, as well as improving the close reading of primary sources and writing in the style of the discipline.

### Purpose

Scholars and professionals use literature reviews as useful reports that keep them up-to-date in their field. The depth and breadth of the literature review emphasizes the credibility of the writer in his or her field. Keep in mind that a literature review has a clear focus but is not its own study and does not attempt to contribute new information to the existing literature. Instead, literature reviews provide solid background for a research paper's investigation. In some cases a literature review provides a new way of looking at the knowledge base, usually by providing a new theoretical framework, but this is generally beyond what would be expected of an undergraduate student.

### Process

This handout focuses on the psychology literature review, but the basic elements should be the same across disciplines. Consult with your professor for advice more specific to your field of study. The writing process is usually broken into the following steps:

- Research and reading
- Annotated bibliography
- Integration of sources (synthesis)
- Outline
- Drafting and revising

The following pointers can help you at every stage of this process:

**Focus** – Define a specific topic as you begin your research. After reading your materials, adjust your focus. Should you widen your scope, to include more sources? Should you narrow your focus, to concentrate on a more specific subject area?

**Thesis statement** – As you adjust your focus, you will develop and revise your thesis statement or guiding question(s). Unlike in a research paper, your thesis statement here will not necessarily argue for a position, interpretation, or opinion; rather, it will present a particular perspective on the material.

**Relevance** – Include only the information that is directly relevant to your research topic. Giving a complete summary of an experiment is not expected and will not help your paper. Including information relative to your topic is the goal of the Literature Review. Keep it simple and your point will be very clear to the reader.

**Organization** – Organization is critical. The placement of your references is essential, and should be carefully planned. Try grouping together the references you feel can be easily compared or contrasted before you begin writing.

- Use your introductory paragraphs to set the stage for the basic and background information relevant to your research topic. That way, you won't have to explain during the actual Literature Review.
- Transition between paragraphs, integrated sections, and your discussion of articles in such a way that the reader won't forget your research topic.
- Refer back to the big picture.

## LITERATURE REVIEWS (cont'd)

**Integration** – Find connections between sources. Rather than summarize each source, discuss what they have in common, in what ways they intersect, or how they significantly differ. While integrating, or synthesizing, your sources, keep the big picture in mind: **theory!** Think of the theory that inspired your research topic and integrating articles will be a much easier task.

- Don't just summarize the articles!
- Remind the reader of the importance/relevance of each article.
- Point out the connections made between articles, and also to your research topic.

**Outline** – Create an outline as you write and begin to integrate your sources. Use your outline to ensure that you are appropriately integrating your sources and that your review refers back to the theory. Once you are able to integrate articles, the organization of your paper will flow, and transition between articles will be coherent.

**Paraphrasing, summarizing, and plagiarizing** – Be careful to be as accurate as possible when you paraphrase an author's argument or main point, and to paraphrase with your own words. Be concise but remember to include the information necessary for a complete understanding of the ideas presented. Note citations as you read and in your own notes, to avoid accidentally plagiarizing an author's work.

### For Psychology Literature Reviews:

#### QMRI (Mnemonic Device)

Whether you're writing a simple annotated bibliography, an integration or your literature review, remember QMRI:

**Q:** What is the **question**? What are the goals of the experiment? What is the hypothesis?

**M:** What is the **method**? What are the independent variables, and how are they being measured? Also include other important conditions relevant to your topic (Subject Variables, Equipment, etc.)

**R:** What are the **results** of the experiment?

**I:** What are the **implications** of the results? Why is this experiment important?

#### Style/Formatting

-Refer to the APA Manual for information about punctuation, spacing, references, numbers, etc.

-Any abbreviations or acronyms should be written out fully (but only the first time you use one).

#### Bibliography

*In creating this handout, we consulted and/or modified information from the following sources:*

[http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/literature\\_review.html](http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/literature_review.html)