

Research, Writing and Citation Guides

Writing a Literature Review

What is a Literature Review?

A literature review examines earlier research relevant to the topic being studied. The amount of research already conducted on any specific topic will vary based upon a number of factors, including: (a) the length of time the topic has been documented and investigated; (b) the amount of scholarly and popular attention that has been devoted to the topic; as well as the (c) the complexities of the topic.

Steps Involved in Writing a Literature Review

Writing a literature review involves the following seven basic steps:

Step 1. Introduce the literature review by:

- (a) stating the major research topics that will be discussed,
- (b) discussing the *central idea* being explored, and the
- (c) explaining the topic's academic and/or societal importance.

Step 2. Select literature that is most relevant to your topic and research question. Use the following criteria to select and evaluate previous research:

Authority

- (a) Who authored the work?
- (b) Are the author's qualifications for writing on the topic provided?
 - Are the author's qualifications relevant to the topic he/she is writing about?
- (c) What is the name of the journal, newspaper, or website that published the work?
 - What company or organization owns the journal, newspaper, or website?
- (d) Is there any indication that the work underwent some type of peer-review process prior to publication?

Accuracy

- (a) Are sources for factual information provided, so that the facts can be verified in the original source?
- (b) Are any graphs, charts, and/or tables clearly labeled and easy to read?
- (c) Is the work free of grammatical, spelling, and typographical errors?

Objectivity

- (a) Is the point of view of the author evident?
- (b) For controversial topics, does the author give equal attention to both sides of the argument?
- (c) Does the author use neutral language?

Currency

- (a) Are dates provided to indicate the time frame covered by the work?
- (b) For studies, does the author indicate when data collection took place?

Sufficiency

- (a) Does the author provide sufficient evidence to support each of her/his main points?

Consistency

- (a) Is factual information and other evidence presented by the author consistent or is selected evidence contradictory to other evidence?

Contextuality

- (a) Does the author present information in its proper context?

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Step 3. Examine the literature and make note of information and ideas that are pertinent to your topic and research.

Step 4. Organize the relevant research you located on the topic in a logical arrangement. Rubin, Rubin, and Piele (1986, pp. 45-46) recommend the following patterns for organizing the literature review section:

Topical Order: Use to organize the review by main topics or issues.

Chronological Order: Use to organize the review in a time sequence, usually from past to present.

Problem-Cause-Solution Order: Use to organize the review so that it moves from the problem to the solution.

General-to-Specific Order: Use to examine broad-based research first and then focus on specific studies that relate to the topic.

Known-to-Unknown Order: Use to explore what is known and still not known about a topic.

Comparison-and-Contrast Order: Use to explain the similarities and differences among research studies on the topic.

Specific-to-General Order: Use to try to better understand specific research studies in order to draw conclusions from them.

Step 5. Draw upon the research you have collected and examined to briefly discuss what investigations have and have not been done on your specific topic, and what additional investigations still need to be done.

Step 6. Develop a formal research question or state a hypothesis and link it to the literature you reviewed.

Step 7. Compile a bibliography listing citations for all of the sources that you used in writing the literature review.

The citations in the bibliography should follow the citation style principally used by scholars in your field of study or discipline.

References:

Alexander, J. E., & Tate, M. A. (1999). *Web wisdom: How to evaluate and create information quality on the Web*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Frey, L. R., Botan, C. H., Friedman, P. G., & Kreps, G. L. (1991). *Investigating communication*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, pp. 89-91

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