Writing Literature Reviews

What is a Literature Review?
Literature reviews may be written as separate assignments or as a section within a longer paper or thesis chapter. Writing a literature review requires you to demonstrate many essential academic skills: to perform research, to read carefully, to analyze and synthesize theories and findings, and to make an organized argument about the body of research on a topic. Furthermore, by assigning a literature review, your instructor expects that you will develop detailed knowledge about an important topic and you will recognize the dynamic nature of scholarship within a particular field of study.

In a literature review, you must survey a range of sources on a particular topic and analyze how scholars have examined and explained this particular topic. You must present a focused and organized argument about the state of knowledge on this topic, considering how research has progressed, evaluating debates, and identifying unanswered questions.

Establish Direction
1. Narrow your focus. Because you need to discuss a wide range of sources in a literature review, you may find it difficult to narrow your focus for an effective critique and understanding of research on the topic. Indeed, you may need to consider theoretical frameworks, methodology, and a variety of data sources or evidence alongside the findings and conclusions put forth by the authors of the articles and books that inform your review. It is important to consider the purpose of your literature review to ensure you ask appropriate questions of your topic.

2. Understand its purpose. In a literature review that stands alone, your argument may be related to the development of a body of knowledge, the significance of debates within the literature, or future directions for research. The literature review should always offer an analytical discussion of the value or meaning of a body of knowledge. Later in this document, we offer strategies to encourage this thinking and organize your ideas.

For a thesis or major paper in an advanced course, a literature review establishes a framework for original research. In this case, you should also be sure to consider the questions that have not been asked or the perspective that have not been considered. It is important to explain how the literature informs your original work and how your work builds on the body of knowledge that exists.

Become familiar with particular conventions for your discipline by reading published work. For a history course, you may write a historiography, which is a literature review. In psychology, you need to include particular details about the studies you review, so look to published meta-analyses or reviews for direction.

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3. Organize your ideas. Successful literature reviews offer a clear thesis or position about the current state of research on the topic usually organized comparatively, chronologically or thematically. A literature review should not be a collection of disconnected paragraphs that summarize different articles.

A literature review can be organized in many different ways depending on the discipline as well as the nature of the topic and the purpose of the review. A review might be organized chronologically to show how scholars’ views on a topic have changed over time; it could also be organized thematically or by methodology to group together scholars who share similar views or methods. A comparative organization offers an opportunity to assess sides of a debate or different theoretical lenses.

Read Sources Analytically
Read each source closely and carefully to determine key ideas from the source and to analyze the source independently of other sources. Consider the following questions and categories, which some students find it helpful to organize these questions in a chart:

1. Identify the author(s). Expert or authority on the subject?
2. Date of publication. Revised edition? When originally published?
3. What kind of research is it? Empirical, review, argumentative, meta-analysis? How does this form affect the findings or relevance of this work?
4. What is the research question and rationale for that question? Is the rationale valid?
5. Is there a particular theoretical framework that informs this source? How does this framework influence its argument or findings?
6. Is there a particular methodological framework that informs this source? How does this framework influence its argument or findings?
7. How does the evidence or data support the arguments or findings of the source?
8. What are the implications of the argument or findings?

Although your personal response to the literature may lead you to important insights, your assessment of the research cannot be driven by your biases or assumptions. Instead, you must inquire further when you have an immediate reaction to a piece of evidence or the basis for an argument. Consider the root of the reaction to ground your analysis and to understand bigger questions or trends in the literature.

Synthesize the Sources
Consider relationships between your sources and how these relationships influence the current state of knowledge on the topic. You may find it helpful to organize your notes in
particular folders, create a table, or use colour coding to make these relationships visible. The following questions can encourage synthesis:

1. On what points do sources agree? What are the key concepts or theories that are accepted on this topic? How does one source build upon knowledge established by another?

2. What are points of contention? Are there important debates on this topic? What lenses or frameworks inform the different sides of these debates? What do these debates reveal? Is one position more effective/persuasive? Why?

3. How have ideas developed in different times, places, or fields?

4. Where are current directions in research heading?

Develop a position on the body of work.
A literature review must have a focused perspective. Take time to consider the sources to develop a cohesive and insightful discussion about the body of scholarship. Again, use inquiry to spark your thinking; you may find one or more of these questions to be helpful:

- What evidence, methods, or perspectives have influenced the current understanding of this topic?

- What is the direction of scholarship? How has it changed? How is it changing?

- What has not been addressed? Why does it need be addressed?

**Attribution of Sources**
Specificity is necessary for clear communication. In particular, you must clearly identify the authors of works to differentiate their findings, approaches, and perspectives. Whether you are summarizing an argument or analyzing its logic, include the author’s name in the sentence (alongside appropriate citations). For example, “Black (2011) argues that print media has an important place in the 21st century, but this position is not common; in fact, research by Khan and Stewart (2010), Li and Korchev (2012), and Atkins et. al (2012) demonstrates that print media’s influence is limited to small audiences.” This example also shows how to pull sources together into a cohesive point, rather than separately summarizing them.

Remember, there is no one model for a successful literature review; your direction is determined by your critical reading of the sources, your purpose for the review, and the conventions of your field of study. Be sure to ask your course instructor for advice if you are unsure of your approach to this type of work.

**Literature Review: Sample**
This is an excerpt from a literature review in a fourth-year educational sociology paper. Note how the author integrates arguments by different authors within a discussion about one point to demonstrate the debates that exist in the literature.
Furthermore, this author puts forth a position about these debates.

[Topic sentence describing the point of the paragraph] The most significant element of anti-racist education is the recognition of race and racism. Social work theorist, Dorothy Chave Herberg (1993) examines the divergent Canadian understandings of racism. She notes there are some who directly address racism and those who do not recognize its existence in present-day Canada. Chave Herberg, Enid Lee (1985), and sociologist Carl James (1994) emphasize the necessity of discussing race and racism. [Making connections between sources] Chave Herberg argues that Canadians must recognize their own history of racism as she identifies and condemns a cultural condition which seems to inhibit discussions about race. Lee notes that many people feel uncomfortable talking about racism and believe that silence will diminish its impact on society. However, she argues that it is only through discussion that racism can be understood, and action for its abolition can begin. James urges all teachers to recognize the racial differences of students. He shows that without a recognition of their differences, students are marginalised and silenced, but when difference is validated by a teacher, students are welcomed into a positive learning environment. Conversely, Education professor Keith McLeod (1994) stresses the importance of non-racialism. [Illustrating debates within the field] He argues that students have difficulty developing positive relationships in an environment where difference is emphasized, but by recognizing the common traits shared by people, students can learn to “cope” with their differences and discrimination (McLeod, 1994, p. 19). It is interesting to note that McLeod believes it is sufficient for students to “cope” with their differences and discrimination. He does not discuss how they understand their difference, nor how they are motivated to challenge discrimination. McLeod fails to recognize the foundation of the arguments of Chave Herberg, Lee, and James: critical analysis of difference (race) and discrimination (racism) is fundamental to anti-racism education. [Author’s position on topic]