

Literature Review

What is it? A literature review synthesizes the existing research on an issue and makes an argument about that research. It differs from an annotated bibliography in that it synthesizes research instead of discussing sources independently. One might include a lit review section within a larger study in order to prove that a gap exists in the scholarship (which the writer's study will fill). Others write stand-alone lit reviews to familiarize readers with an issue and suggest avenues for further study.

What purpose does it serve? A lit review helps scholars quickly grasp the current state of research on an issue. It also establishes the writer's credibility by demonstrating mastery of the research.

Structure and content

Beginning. The beginning of a lit review typically offers an explanation of the issue it addresses. It may offer a historical overview about the study of this topic or suggest why it's worthy of study.

Middle. The middle develops the theme. This is where you present sources in a structured way, usually chronologically, thematically, or methodologically.

End. The end of a lit review forms a conclusion by either discussing what ideas you have drawn from the review and/or suggesting where the discussion might head in the future.

Process

- ✓ *Find* the key sources. Narrow your focus until you have a manageable number of relevant, current sources to address. Choose the more influential studies. How? Ask professors for recommendations, and note which sources bibliographies cite most often. Favor sources from well-respected publications and publishers.
- ✓ *Summarize and analyze* the sources. Examine their arguments, methodology, conclusions, strengths, weaknesses, omissions, and scope.
- ✓ *Synthesize* the sources. Put the sources in the contexts of the others. Look for trends, gaps, patterns, contrasts, contradictions, and shifts among them. Group sources according to commonalities.
- ✓ *Form an argument* that brings your synthesis together.
- ✓ *Organize* the lit review according to the groups you made.
- ✓ *Connect* the groups together with transitions.

Common pitfalls

- *Merely summarizing or listing sources.* Instead, synthesize the sources, making an argument about how they represent a particular issue.
- *Including lesser sources.* A lit review should examine the significant studies on a topic.
- *Ignoring methodology.* Assess not only the results of studies but also whether the researchers arrived at those results using sound methods.
- *Including quotations.* Lit reviews do not typically quote from sources.
- *Seeing only what's there.* Good literature reviews will show readers not only what previous studies include but what's missing.
- *Using weak transitions.* One way to highlight your synthesis is to write strong transitions that show readers the relationships among the sources.