

## WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW

### What Is a Literature Review?

A literature review discusses published studies and commentaries in a particular subject area and offers an overview of that literature.

Literature reviews analyze sources relevant to a particular issue or area of research, and are typically included in scholarly papers in the social sciences and “hard” sciences (biology, chemistry, etc.). The term *literature* in this context refers to a body of **research** literature (It does not mean the literary works encompassed by terms like *American literature*).

Literature reviews provide a summary and synthesis of the information already published on an issue. A **summary** is a recap of the important information in a source. A **synthesis** is the combination of several sources into a single text, with the aim of creating an understanding of the information in those sources or an original perspective on that information, and/or highlighting patterns, themes, conflicts, and gaps in the sources.

A literature review is not the same as an argumentative research paper. Literature reviews summarize and synthesize the information already written about a certain field or topic *without* adding new contributions. While literature reviews include critical analysis of the arguments in the sources presented, they should not go beyond this critical analysis, that is, **they should not include the original arguments or ideas of the writer** (that’s you!).

Often, writing a literature review will be part of the process of writing an argumentative paper or part of the argumentative paper itself. The literature review serves to situate the current paper in the body of relevant literature and to provide context for the reader.

### The Process

#### 1. Collect and Evaluate Relevant Literature

If you are writing the literature review as preparation for or as part of a research paper, your focus will be literature related to your research topic and questions. If you are writing a literature review as a stand-alone assignment, you will have to choose a focus and develop a central question to direct your search.

As you read different sources, ask yourself the following questions:

- What question or problem is the author addressing?
- What are the key theories, models and methods?
- What are the results and conclusions of the study?
- How does the source relate to other literature in the field? Does it confirm, add to, or challenge established knowledge?

- How does the source contribute to your understanding of the topic? What are its key insights and arguments?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the research?

These questions will help you decide whether a particular source should be included in your literature review.

## 2. Organize and Synthesize the Literature

Once you have gathered your sources and decided on what points are important to include in your review, consider how to present this information in a cohesive and logical way. Keep in mind that a literature review, although a summary of existing literature, is usually organized around ideas. Rather than listing sources one at a time and describing their findings, consider what themes or issues connect your sources together.

The body of your literature review can be organized in different ways:

- **Chronologically:** Organized either by date of publication (if the timeline demonstrates an important progression) or by the trends observed over time, regardless of whether the source was published within that timeline or later.
- **Thematically:** Organized around a topic or issue, rather than progression in time. A thematic review will shift between time periods within each section because the focus is on subject matter or theme rather than time.
- **Methodologically:** Focused on the methods used by the sources rather than the content of the material. A methodological approach will influence either the types of documents in the review or the way in which these documents are discussed.

Which method of organization you choose will depend on the subject area and the aspects you focus on. If you format your review chronologically, you might have subsections/paragraphs for each important time period. If thematically, your subsections will be based on factors that relate to the theme or issue. If methodologically, your subsections will focus on the different methodologies. The use of headings for your subsections might be helpful to the reader.

## 3. Write the Literature Review

Like most academic papers, a literature review should include an introduction, a main body, and a conclusion. The introduction establishes the subject of the literature review (the central theme or the organizational pattern); the body contains your discussion of sources (organized either chronologically, thematically, or methodologically); and the conclusion addresses what you have learned from reviewing the literature so far and where the discussion might proceed.

In composing the review, make sure to ...

- **Use evidence:** Your interpretation of the available sources should be backed up with evidence. However, use quotes sparingly. The nature of a literature review doesn't allow for detailed quotes from the text or in-depth analysis.
- **Use your own voice:** A literature review presents others' ideas, but you should be using your own words to summarize and synthesize the information. Start and end a paragraph in your own words; use transitions and topic sentences to draw connections, comparisons, and contrasts; rephrase the studies' significance and relate this back to your main point; paraphrase accurately; and add your critical analysis of the sources.