

Writing a Literature Review

What

A review of literature is a summary of previous research on the issue. Although it may be written as a separate document, it is usually part of the introduction to a paper. It serves as a background and justification for your paper's focus/proposal/thesis/hypothesis by raising those issues and presenting those findings the reader will need to understand your paper. It should represent all the major perspectives you have come across in your reading.

Why

The purpose of a review of the literature is to explain how the question under investigation (i.e., your research question) fits into the larger picture and why your question was approached as it was.

How

Explain what past research has been done on the issue. Do this by including short summaries of major articles you found, citing sources as you mention them. Focus on the different ways the various sources treat the subject. Show the connections (or lack of) between/among sources. Group similar articles or books together and explain their similarities or explain how one group of articles differs from another. Show how this past work fits together to make your question a logical one to raise, how you will logically enter the ongoing, written "conversation" about your issue. Your final page should list references or works cited.

Note that, because you are not reviewing all possible sources on your subject, a review of the literature presents the student writer's particular synthesis or point of view about previous work.

In Summary

A review of the literature has these five characteristics:

- Survey character: demonstrates a range of work and approaches
- Synthetic and analytic character: shows the connections and distinctions between various groups of work
- Progressive character: is concerned with chronological development of ideas and knowledge
- Evaluative character: may critique various lines of work
- Future orientation: opens up possibilities for further work

You can use your review of literature to...

Develop an original perspective about the topic, based on the literature you reviewed. You may

- Find a new question to ask
- Discover areas neglected or only partially explored
- Apply new information/data to reevaluate an old question
- Take a fresh slant or approach: see the question from a new perspective or from a distance of time; perhaps look at less practical considerations or at new relationships or connections.