

Student Writing Center Resource: Writing a Literature Review

Purpose

A literature review gives readers background on how your topic has to date been studied and understood. A literature review should answer these questions:

- What does the field already know about [topic]?
- What kinds of studies have been done about [topic]?
- What methods have been used, and how helpful have they turned out to be?
- What has been found?
- What kinds of information are still lacking?

Depending on the context of your assignment, a literature review also might be expected to:

- Emphasize gaps in the current understanding of a topic, helping to make the case for work that still needs to be done (e.g., your capstone project).
- Include your own insights/opinions, especially if the topic lends itself to debate or different points of view (e.g., a public health issue or new treatment approach).

Suggested Process

First, locate a number of significant and relevant articles or other references on your topic. Be sure to follow any specific guidelines regarding the number of references required for the assignment, acceptable sources (e.g., peer-reviewed publications versus books or websites), and, in some instances, how recent the publications are (e.g., within the last 5 years).

The staff at Scott Memorial Library can help with finding relevant literature and selecting your sources. Librarians are available to help you develop effective research questions, select appropriate search terms, recommend specific databases (e.g., PubMed, Ovid), review your search strategies, and help you organize your research using online tools (e.g., EndNote and RefWorks). You can email the library to make a research appointment using AskLibrarian@jefferson.edu, or access more research assistance at <https://library.jefferson.edu/help/>.

Once your sources are finalized, next steps include:

1. Read the Introduction and Discussion sections of your sources to learn:
 - Why the authors conducted their research
 - What questions they hoped to answer
 - What conclusions they reached

2. Read the Methods and Results sections of the same studies to learn

- The kinds of materials used or sites or subjects observed
- The kinds of measurements taken or observations made
- The kinds of analyses performed

3. Construct a chart to organize your findings visually and enable you to see similarities and differences at a glance. This will help to organize your thoughts before you begin to write the literature review.

Structure

Be sure to carefully read any specific instructions you have been given for the assignment regarding a literature review. Generally, these three elements will be expected:

- The **introduction** establishes the significance of your topic and gives a brief background as well as a preview of the trends you have identified.
- The **body** contains more information about the trends, clustered to highlight similarities and differences, points of agreement and disagreement. This should not be a summary of each source one after the other; rather, you need to demonstrate that you have understood and synthesized the information and organized it around key themes. Use topic sentences to introduce these themes and then use the body of each paragraph to explore similarities/differences across your sources.
- The **conclusion** provides an overview of what is known, what is still undecided, and what is left to explore. Again, sometimes an assignment will be designed to include your own voice and opinions as a “moderator” of the literature review, so be sure you understand what the expectations are.

Length

Sometimes an entire assignment is focused on a literature review or a synthesis of ideas across two or more articles. More often, a literature review is part of a larger writing assignment.

In the absence of specific instructions about the length of a literature review, a general rule of thumb is that it should be proportionate to the length of your entire paper. For example, if your total paper is expected to be 15 pages long, 2-3 pages will likely suffice for the literature review. Again, be sure to carefully read (more than once) the assignment guidelines and rubric provided by faculty.