

Writing a literature review

A literature review is usually written as part of a postgraduate thesis proposal or at the beginning of a dissertation or thesis. A literature review gives an overview of the area of study:

- what has already been said on the topic;
- who the key writers are;
- what the prevailing theories and hypotheses are;
- what questions are being asked; and
- what methodologies are appropriate and useful.

In a literature review, you demonstrate that you have read and understood previous and current research in the area.

1. Do a literature search. Find out what has been written about your topic. A good starting point is the list of references or bibliography of a recent article or book on the topic. Then use other bibliographical sources including abstracts, electronic data bases and the Internet. If you decide that a text is relevant, write down the bibliographical details in full — as the item would appear in your list of references or bibliography. If you use systems cards and write one item at the top of each card, you will save time later on. Personal bibliographic software such as EndNote, is an extremely useful tool for tracking reading, organising references and automatically generating reference lists.

2. Find the literature. First check whether the material is held at UNE. If it is not, your supervisor might be able to assist with some of the material, you may be able to spend some time working in a library which has more comprehensive holdings, or you might be able to use inter-library loans.

3. Read the literature. Record the author and the title (you already have the other bibliographical information) and take notes. Your aim is to determine how the topic is approached and what is said about it. As you make notes, you might find it useful to ask yourself the following questions about each text.

What sort of text is it?
What is the methodology?
Is a particular approach or school followed?
What are the definitions used?
What is the theoretical basis?
What evidence is used to back up the thesis?
What are the conclusions?

4. Write short summaries. For each relevant text, try to write a one paragraph summary similar to an abstract.

5. Organise the summaries. Try to identify similarities and group the summaries accordingly. The headings under which the summaries are grouped will vary, depending on the topic and the subject.

6. Write each section. Each section of your literature review should deal with a specific aspect of the literature.

7. Decide on the order of presentation. In most cases, this would be from most important to least important, or from established to more controversial theories.

8. Write the conclusion. The conclusion should include a summary of major agreements and disagreements in the literature and a summary of the general conclusions drawn. If the literature review is part of a dissertation or thesis, you should also indicate your own area of research. This might involve identifying a gap in the previous research, identifying problems with the previous research or proposing to extend previous knowledge.

9. Write the introduction. The introduction should include a clear statement of the topic and its parameters. You should also indicate why the research area is important, interesting, problematic or relevant in some way.

10. Proofread and edit carefully. The literature review is an important part of a dissertation or thesis. It should be thorough and accurate.