

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; however, you may be required to write a literature review as a stand-alone essay in a unit of study. 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. Format of a literature review
2. Steps for writing a literature review

1. Format of a literature review

A literature review follows an essay format (Introduction, Body, Conclusion) if you are asked to write it as a stand-alone essay.

- **Introduction**

Topic sentences that contextualise your review (purpose, significance and scope)

Following sentence/s that state criteria for your literature selection

Final sentence/s that signals list of key topics that will be used to discuss the selected sources

- **Body**

Divide up your text into sections/topics as indicated in the last sentence of your introduction. Each paragraph will present a theme/topic that is **a synthesis of the many texts** that you have chosen for your literature review.

Do not confuse this part of writing with an annotated bibliography, which describes and evaluates individual texts.

- **Conclusion**

Summarise the main agreements and disagreements in the literature

Identify gaps or areas for further research

State an overall perspective on the topic

2. Steps for writing a literature review

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 and check whether the material is held at UNE via such search engines as Google Scholar or relevant databases. If it is not, your supervisor might be able to assist with some of the material or you might be able to use inter-library loans. Very often, you need to refine your search topic if it is too broad or narrow. You will then need to look up scholarly materials in the relevant databases.

2. 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, 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?

3. Write short summaries

For each relevant text, try to write a one-paragraph summary similar to an abstract.

4. 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.

5. Write each section

Each section of your literature review will deal with a specific theme/topic identified in the literature, as mentioned in the example plan.

6. Decide on the order of presentation

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

7. 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.

8. Write the introduction

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

9. Proofread and edit carefully

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