The literature review is the foundation of your thesis and establishes your position within your discipline's scholarly community. Find out how to write a successful literature review.

About the literature review

The literature review usually constitutes the second chapter of your thesis and lends authority to the following chapters. It contains summaries and critical analyses of reported research relating to aspects of your research question and the methods available to address the question. Successful theses generally have a strong, relevant and well-structured literature review.

Function

The literature review:

• Provides the context for your research
• Acknowledges the work of others
• Establishes your thesis in the chain of research in your field
• Identifies an appropriate research question
• Finds evidence to establish the need for the proposed research
• Shows an examiner you are familiar with important research in your area
• Demonstrates to an examiner your critical understanding of theory.

Relevance

Ensure that every text you include in your literature review does one or more of the following:

• Deals with theory that underpins the thesis
• Makes a definitive statements about an aspect of your study
• Deals with your subject area or overlaps it
• Shows your acknowledgement of others’ work in the research field
• Assists in building a coherent argument
• Puts your work into an external context
• Defines the current state of research in your area.

Characteristics

A competent literature review:

• Avoids merely presenting a description of the literature and previous work on the topic
• Comments on the value of the literature summarised in the review
• Clearly presents your argument and perspective in relation to the literature reviewed
• Correctly interprets the findings of the reviewed literature and its relevance to your research question.
Organisation

The literature review is organised by conceptual themes. The introductory paragraph sets the boundaries of the literature review and provides an overview of the whole literature review. The remaining paragraphs are organised into sections and sub-sections, with a summary at the end of each major section to emphasise the points being made. Avoid organising article by article or author by author.

Questions the literature review should answer

- What do we already know in the research area?
- What are the characteristics of the key concepts/factors/variables?
- What are the relationships between the key concepts/factors/variables?
- What are the existing theories?
- Where are the gaps and inconsistencies in our knowledge and understanding?
- What views need to be further tested?
- What current research designs or methods seem unsatisfactory?
- What evidence is lacking/inconclusive/contradictory/too limited?
- What contribution is my research expected to make?

Common mistakes made in literature reviews

- They fail to provide the underpinnings of methodology, hypotheses and guiding questions
- They draw on outdated or discredited literature
- They fail to address the latest literature
- They present a biased or limited view of issues
- They avoid difficult and conflicting material
- They are too short and/or superficial
- They do not critically appraise the literature
- They organise the literature article by article, not by themes
- They present a collection of facts and the opinions of others rather than a considered authorial review
- They do not provide summaries or evaluations.