The purpose of a literature review is for you to take a critical look at the literature (facts and views) that already exists in the area you are researching. Here you can access tips on writing an effective literature review.

Why write a literature review?

The purpose of a literature review is for you to take a critical look at the literature (facts and views) that already exists in the area you are researching. A literature review is not a shopping list of everything that exists, but a critical analysis that shows an evaluation of the existing literature and a relationship between the different works. It demonstrates the relevance of the research.

Literature can include books, journal articles, internet (electronic journals), newspapers, magazines, theses and dissertations, conference proceedings, reports, and documentaries.

What should you write?

- The accepted facts in the area
- The popular opinion
- The main variables
- The relationship between concepts and variables
- Shortcomings in the existing findings
- Limitations in the methods used in the existing findings
- The relevance of your research
- Suggestions for further research in the area.

Layout

Make your literature review have an academic and professional appearance. Here are some points to make the look of your report appealing to the reader.

- **White space**: leave space between sections, especially from the abstract. This gives an uncluttered effect
- **Headings/sub-headings**: these help to separate ideas
- **Graphics**: centre your graphics, such as diagrams or tables, to have space around them. Try not to bury graphics in your text
- **Pagination**: you can number pages or sections or both, but the important thing to do is to be consistent. The cover page normally is not numbered. The content page and abstract page usually have a separate numbering system to the body of your literature review.

Structure

Here is a recommended structure, which you can tailor to suit your literature review. (Note that a literature review can be a separate exercise or part of a thesis). The following structure outline treats the literature review as a separate exercise.

- Cover page
- Table of contents
- List of figures (if applicable)
- Abstract/Executive Summary
- Key words
Steps within the process

1. Think of key words
2. Begin research via catalogues/databases
3. Keep a detailed and accurate record of references (perhaps using EndNote)
4. Find a thread to follow
5. Conceptualise your abstract
6. Research more deliberately
7. Photocopy
8. Make notes - separate page for each writer
9. Begin to group writers with similar views
10. Start to write the body
11. Meet to discuss ideas/progress with supervisor/lecturer/tutor or anyone who can be a sounding board for the logic of your findings
12. Create a thread (cohesion and coherence) by bringing the different parts together
13. Write your conclusion
14. Write the introduction
15. Re-work the abstract so that it succinctly outlines the review.

You may have already worked out that you cannot read everything about the subject: remind yourself that is not the aim of a literature review. You are surveying the most relevant and significant work, and you do this by filtering.

Write as soon as you start to formulate some ideas on the subject. You can re-write as many drafts as you like, but start writing as soon as possible. This helps you formulate ideas, and the task is not as daunting as leaving it until you have 'finished' all the reading.

Start to formulate relationships between the various views as soon as you can. Decide whether the structure warrants a chronological order; most opposite view to closest view to your own; grouped in similar views; sequenced in groups from least to most accepted views.

Language focus

Create a balance between direct quotation (citation) and paraphrasing. Avoid too much direct quoting. The verb tense chosen depends on your emphasis:

- When you are writing about an accepted fact, use the present tense: (demonstrates, finds)
- When you are citing a specific author's findings, use the past tense: (found, demonstrated)
- When you are citing several authors or making a general statement, use the present perfect tense: (have shown, have found, little research has been done).
Planning, writing and formatting

Stage 1: Planning

Defining the purpose:
- Read the requirements carefully and identify key words

Defining the audience:
- Determine your audience's level of understanding
- Determine what your audience needs to know.

Establishing parameters:
- You can't put in all the information about a topic, but you must determine the scope and level of detail required.

Gathering information:
- Ensure the information you gather is relevant, contemporary and factually correct
- Make sure that you transcribe facts and figures correctly.

Stage 2: Writing

Writing the body

The Introduction Section leads into the main subject matter by giving the necessary background: accepted popular views or those held by leaders in the field of the particular subject, the focus of the review and the purpose of the review. If specialist terms are used in the report, define them clearly. The introduction gives validity to the importance of the research and gives background information on the subject.

The Body Section gives the main findings. It describes, analyses, interprets and evaluates the procedures, data, findings, relationships, visual material, methodology and results found thus far. This information should be presented in an order that leads logically towards the conclusion.

The Conclusion Section should not introduce any new material. It should follow logically from the Body. It should summarise the main findings.

Writing the Abstract/Executive Summary

Once the body is written, then write the abstract. This is a concise summary presentation of the essential elements of your findings: from the introduction and including the conclusion. It should be short but still written in full sentences and paragraphs. Check if it includes:
- Purpose
- Scope
- Main points
- Conclusion.

Stage 3: Formatting (supplementary material)

Title page
- Title of subject for Literature Review
- Author's name, position and qualifications
- Date.
Table of contents

This shows the section titles and major headings listed in order of appearance and indicates page locations. Standard page numbering begins with the Introduction. The Abstract is usually numbered with lower case Roman numerals (see your reference guide, such as APA, Harvard etc., for specific standards and requirements).

References

This lists all publications either cited or referred to in your Literature Review. Use the Referencing System recommended by your School.

Revising and proofreading

Editing ensures that the material is presented accurately and clearly. Redrafting is a form of editing. It ensures consistency and unity. Does it flow smoothly? These are points to re-work:

- Differences in style between sections (formal/informal)
- Repetition in text
- Lack of transitional phrases
- Lack of visual unity (graphics, fonts, space)
- Lack of unity of function between sections (inaccuracy, lack of logic between introduction, body and conclusion/recommendation).

Proof-reading looks out for the mechanical errors in your document. If you just read it, you can miss a lot of the errors. Here are some techniques:

- Read the text backwards
- Do not read the entire text in one sitting
- Have someone else read the text to you whilst you check it
- Have someone else read the text
- Place a piece of card under each line of the text as you read it

All of these techniques are designed to help you get some distance from the text you have written. They can be very effective.

Literature review checklist

- Have you fulfilled the purpose of the literature review?
- Is it written at a level appropriate to its audience?
- Are its facts correct?
- Is all the information included relevant?
- Are the layout and presentation easy on the eye?
- Is the language clear, concise and academic?
- Does the abstract summarise the entire review?
- Does the introduction adequately introduce the topic?
- Is the body organised logically?
- Does the conclusion interpret, analyse and evaluate?
- Are the recommendations reasonable?
- Does the table of contents correspond with the actual contents? Are page numbers correct?
- Have you acknowledged all sources of information through correct referencing?
- Have you checked spelling, grammar and punctuation?
- Have you carefully proof-read the final draft?