

# LITERATURE REVIEWS

Literature reviews ....

- are an integral part of graduate studies to help you become fully conversant with a topic area
- may be a stand alone paper or part of a research paper or proposal
- present a survey of scholarly articles, books and other sources that provides a summary, synthesis and critical evaluation of key ideas and work on a topic area.
- present a big picture or overview of significant work done on a topic
- enable you to gain deep understanding and insight by standing on the shoulders of giants
- help you prepare for further original research by analysis of the current state of research on a topic
- take time, patience, a clear mind and good organizational skills

A good literature review demonstrates

**THOROUGHNESS** – you have looked at key scholars and studies, current and classic research, you have explored key aspects of the topic. *skills: search, note taking, analysis, organization*

**QUALITY & RELIABILITY** – articles are mostly from peer-reviewed journals, accuracy of citations. *skills: search, note-taking, cross-checking, organization*

**SYNTHESIS** – you can connect research studies and ideas to each other and use them to elaborate and support your thesis. *skills: analysis, synthesis, interpretation, noticing patterns, organization, writing*

**OBJECTIVITY** – you show no bias in selecting, interpreting the research you have reviewed; you consider all aspects of a topic and not just those that support your thesis. *skills: analysis, synthesis, interpretation, making comparisons, working with contradictions, organization, writing.*

## The 2 stages of a literature review

### STEP 1: The research process

**SELECT** - focus the topic area • develop topic statement & thesis

**SEARCH** - find articles

**SCAN** - summarise • analyse • synthesize • find patterns

### STEP 2: The writing process

**WRITE** - draft introduction • body • conclusion

**CITE** - keep track of references

**REVISE** - coherence, accuracy, clarity, grammar, APA conventions

# WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW : RESEARCH PROCESS

## A. FINDING A TOPIC → FOCUSING

Focus the topic – not so broad there is too much to cover, nor so narrow there isn't enough material.

**Brainstorm** - mind map aspects of the topic

**Preliminary database search** - quick overview of related issues

**Write a research topic statement** - an encapsulation of the scope of your literature review.

Revise this as you search the library and scan articles.

Expect this process to be cyclical – as you scan articles you will expand your mind map and refocus your topic. This will give you leads for better keyword searches and more relevant articles, which will help you further refine your topic.

### Research Tips

1. **Talk to a Subject Specialist** at the library to develop your mind-map and get help to do effective searches.
2. **Use keywords from abstracts and descriptors** from search results to expand your search.
3. **Become best friends with relevant databases.** A library specialist will help you identify databases and journals that are most relevant to your topic area. Browse these to find out how they are set-up, and what search functions they offer.
4. **Try different databases.**
5. **Begin with the most current research.** These will give you the latest perspectives on a topic, and will point you to key studies you ought to read.
6. **Explore bibliographies** of books and articles you read – what works and scholars are often cited? This gives you a good idea of who and what is relevant and important in the field.
7. **Look for review articles** as they will have done a lot of reading and synthesis for you – there is no need to invent the wheel; use your time better to analyse, trace patterns, find new insights and add to these reviews with later studies.
8. **Identify landmarks** – are you getting a sense of who are the key scholars, how they are aligned with respect to each other in the positions they take on the topic? What are the main theories relevant to this topic, what are the key studies everyone refers to? What are the current debates?
9. **Peer-reviewed journals** contain articles reviewed by experts in the field before they are accepted for publication. Avoid newspapers, magazines and non-peer reviewed journals unless your subject area requires it; e.g. media studies, journalism, performance art. However, even here, while current information and trends might be culled from these sources, search peer-reviewed journals for in-depth studies and explorations.
10. **Wikipedia** is not a reliable reference, although it can be a handy reference for ideas of what to search for in more reliable sources.
11. **Work in Stages**
  - **FIRST PASS** is a broad and general survey to orient yourself to the field and topic, to find out the main theories/frameworks, the key scholars, and their principal publications.
  - **SECOND PASS** - a more detailed, selective process of reading books & articles you have narrowed down as most relevant. You take notes and make summaries of your readings.

## **B. READING • ANALYSIS • SYNTHESIS**

Information is useless if it is not easily recalled and accessed. Make sure you have a good system to manage the notes you take and to keep track of your references. This makes it easier to analyse and evaluate the information and to synthesize it to find patterns, connections and trends.

### **Find a content organizing system that works for you:**

- **3X5 cards** – great for making notes of key information on each article you read. Write the article citation on one side and main points on the other. You can then shuffle the cards as you need, organizing them in themes, methodologies, and trends. They also make a handy reference when you are writing rather than sifting constantly through large stacks of paper or electronic articles.
- **Excel worksheet** – electronic version of the cards. It takes a little effort to set up and begin using the worksheet, but it really pays off later because you can sort the information quickly and easily.

### **Make notes as you read**

Scan articles for an overview - check out abstract, headings

Group articles in categories - theories, methodology, topic aspects

Make notes – these can go on your 3X5 cards or excel sheet:

1. citation
2. main point
3. definitions, key terms
4. theoretical framework
5. methodology – quantitative, qualitative etc, basic profile of study
6. key findings & position - note any important statistics
7. notable points - landmark study, flaws, gaps
8. links to other articles
9. questions that come up as you read
10. quotations you might use – only brief ones.

### **Evaluate what you read**

1. Are there alternative explanations for results?
2. Do researchers make unwarranted assumptions?
3. Do they ignore certain results? (e.g., usually those that do not support their hypothesis)
4. Do they inappropriately interpret results?
5. What is especially relevant or innovative?
6. How is this study useful or important?

***HINT:*** Authors often discuss limitations, unexplored issues, and suggestions for future research in their *Discussion* section.

## **C. WHAT'S MY THESIS?**

Your thesis is based on your topic statement and argues for a particular perspective on the research in the topic area. It is therefore a summary of the overall picture you construct as you survey the field, read widely and discover patterns and connections between ideas:

- What is my topic statement – have I focused it on specific aspects of the topic? Does it address a clear issue?
- What are the key THEORIES or ideas about my topic and issue? Who are the principal researchers and what are their findings?
- Are there patterns and links between ideas – which ones support each other, which contradict, which ones are antecedents to others, which ones follow from others? Look for:
  - THEMES or ISSUES that link articles
  - alternative SOLUTIONS that address the topic/issue
  - GAPS areas not covered sufficiently or pointed to as needing more research
  - TRENDS – is there a dominant viewpoint that is taking shape and why?
  - DEBATES, conflicting opinions and data.
- You can use any of these aspects to focus the organization of your review. Having looked at the research, what perspective on your topic statement will you present?
- Create your thesis by expanding your topic statement:

### example A

**Topic statement:** The impact on elementary age students of removing the arts from ELL curricula.

**Thesis:** Removing the arts from ELL curricula has reduced learning motivation, the use of critical thinking and communication skills, as well as slowed literacy gains among elementary age children.

### example B

**Topic statement:** The importance of self-efficacy in achievement motivation of minority students.

**Thesis:** Self-efficacy contributes to resilience and intrinsic motivation and is a critical aspect of developing the achievement motivation of minority students.

### example C

**Topic statement:** The success of mentoring in preventing new teacher attrition.

**Thesis:** Mentoring programs have been successful in preventing new teacher attrition only when supplemented by a professional school and district culture, mentor training, and when mentors and protégés are in the same school site and grade level.

Notice that it is not possible to expand your topic statement into a strong thesis unless you have consolidated the ideas and directions of research in the articles you have read.

**READY      → You have your thesis**  
**SET         → You have the articles, citations and notes you need to present this thesis.**  
**GO          → YOU ARE READY TO WRITE!!**

# WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW: WRITING PROCESS

## A. WRITING AN INTRODUCTION

*an overview or roadmap of the literature review*

Keep your introduction brief and to the point. Your aim is to orient the reader to the topic area, your specific thesis and the direction and structure of your review. Here are the main aspects to cover:

**CONTEXT** - Present relevant background information. This helps the reader understand the topic area its relation to its field, and helps locate your thesis in relation to the field as well.

**PURPOSE** - Present your thesis.

**JUSTIFICATION** - Explain why we need to address this issue; give an overview of the main debates and perspectives to justify the point of view in your thesis

**SCOPE** - Present range & limitations of the review.

**STRUCTURE** - outline the organization of the paper

## B. THE BODY

**OUTLINE** - each section covers a different aspect of the topic, what is my organization pattern, how many sub-headings?

**ORGANIZE** - select notes to use in each section, arrange according to types of literature (reviews, conceptual papers, empirical studies etc.), methodologies, main findings, contrasting perspectives etc. This will help you summarize and synthesize the information you are presenting.

### Writing tips

**Signposting** - use clear topic sentences and transitions to help the reader follow ideas. Use summary sentences in each section that underscores the significance of what you have synthesized, i.e. it should answer a 'so what' question in response to your presentation.

**Evidence** - use in-text citations

**Quotes** - only if you must, to emphasize a point. Keep quotes very brief and incorporate them into your sentences using quote marks to indicate them.

**Selectivity** – present only points directly relevant to the review's focus

**Paraphrase** - use your own words to avoid plagiarism discussion of the studies you have read – this can be organized chronologically, thematically or methodologically. Your choice of what organizational pattern to follow depends on the topic.

## C. CONCLUSION

**RESTATE** - summarize main points to clarify the 'state of the art' for the topic. Point out existing gaps and directions for future research

**REFOCUS** - show that thesis statement has been demonstrated; what insights have been gained about the topic in relation to the larger field.