



Thesis and Dissertation Literature Reviews

A literature review is a specialized genre intended to demonstrate the writer's familiarity with the relevant scholarship on her topic. Sources for review usually include peer-reviewed journals (print or online), books, dissertations, and theses, but should reflect the accepted media of the writer's field. For example, some fields might require video or creative writing as sources for review. Besides establishing the credentials of the writer, the literature review defines the direction of the thesis or dissertation.

Purpose

The literature review allows the writer to enter the scholarly conversation on an important topic. Specifically, it allows the writer and readers to:

- Better understand the topic or area of research.
- Understand gaps and unanswered questions in previous research.
- Start with a strong foundation for the writer to interpret the findings in his field.
- Prevent duplication of work.
- Perceive the value of the original work in the context of already published material.

Guiding Questions for the Writer

- What is my central question or issue that the literature can help define?
- What is already known about the topic?
- Is the scope of the literature being reviewed wide or narrow enough?
- Is there a conflict or debate in the literature?
- What connections can be made across the texts being reviewed?
- What sort of literature should be reviewed? Historic? Theoretical? Methodological? Quantitative? Qualitative?
- What criteria should be used to evaluate the literature being reviewed?
- How will reviewing the literature justify the topic I plan to investigate?

Organization

The structure of the literature review should allow the writer to focus on the issues he has identified as his topic by highlighting the existing findings on the topic. Like any academic paper, the literature review has an introduction, body, and conclusion:

- Introduction: The thesis sentence narrows the focus of the work under review. It tells the reader what subject the literature is about and gives the reader a roadmap for the organization of the paper.
- Body: Synthesizes the literature to support the thesis statement.
- Conclusion: Explains the conclusions about the topic or area of research as a result of reviewing the literature and explores which areas the topic or research could be expanded upon.

General Advice for the Writer

- Remember the target audience. Eliminate slang and unnecessary jargon.
- Avoid source loss: keep track of sources in your notes. Print or save electronic files.
- Don't overuse quotes; when in doubt, paraphrase.
- When paraphrasing, make sure to attribute any ideas that are not your own.
- Evidence is necessary to make a claim. Your ideas cannot stand alone in a literature review without evidence to back them up.
- Double-check that your paper meets the formatting standards of your discipline.
- Revise, revise, and revise.

Sources

Clark, Irene L. "Writing the Literature Review." *Writing the Successful Thesis and Dissertation: Entering the Conversation*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2007. Print.

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The Literature Review. Deakin University Library. Web.

Write a Literature Review. UC Santa Cruz. Web.