

WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW

What is a literature review?

A literature review is a document that explores the state of research in your field of study. Like an annotated bibliography, literature reviews offer a summary of the important sources for your research as well as some evaluation of the relevance or significance of those sources. But a lit review is more than a bibliography: it reads like a coherent document with its own introduction, conclusion and internal organization.

A lit review can form part of an introduction, stand alone as a chapter within a thesis or dissertation, or even be published as an independent journal article.

Why do we write literature reviews?

The lit review helps the reader know how your work fits into the larger conversation about your topic or in your discipline and demonstrates why your research is necessary.

What kind of information should I include in my literature review?

The lit review should include the title of each source and a short summary of its content.

The depth and nature of your literature review will depend upon the size and scope of your project and the field in which you are studying. If you are writing a Master of Design thesis, the lit review is more likely to be a section or chapter of your thesis. If you are conducting practice-based research toward a Master of Applied Arts degree, the literature review may be incorporated into sections on context (artistic, historical and theoretical), background, or methods and materials. Where you incorporate your textual (secondary) research will depend in large part on what form your research project takes.

What should my literature review look like?

One function of a lit review is to show why the author's research is necessary. As the writer composes the review, they must construct an argument to establish the necessity of the research.

Every literature review will look a little different, because every research project has its own focus. But in general all lit reviews will include:

1. An introduction: typically this outlines why this topic of research is important and provides an overview of how this topic is treated in your field of study.
2. A body: where you introduce sources and provide a summary and evaluation for each source. See below for tips about organization.
3. A conclusion: a short summary of the salient points.

How do I start writing a literature review?

The lit review begins with research. A good way to start writing a lit review is to collect a wide range of articles that pertain to your topic, skim them for general purpose and content, group them into categories and then begin taking notes.

Here are some things to consider when taking notes:

1. Define key terms and look for differences in the way the articles approach them.
2. Note statistics if your thesis is based in data collection or empirical research.
3. Note emphases, strengths and weaknesses in each of the sources.
4. Identify major trends or patterns.
5. Identify gaps in the literature and reflect on why these may exist. How might your work fit into those gaps?
6. Identify relationships among sources—are there different schools of thought that approach your topic in radically different ways? Which of these schools of thought do you fall into?
7. Evaluate your list for currency and coverage. Many fields have a rapidly evolving discourse, so relying on sources that are decades or even years old might not be the best way to go. Of course, this is far more important when it comes to social science research, but it may also be true of theory.

How do I organize my lit review?

Organization is often the hardest part of writing the lit review. Ideally, the structure should reflect the main ideas, key terms and concepts of your own research. You can group research studies and other literature according to common denominators such as qualitative vs. quantitative approaches, theories, methodologies, or conclusions.

The three most common approaches to the lit review are *chronological* – from oldest ideas to newest; *topical* – grouping sources by subject or theme (for example, organizing sources by differing viewpoints, perspectives or sides of an argument); and *order of importance* – from most important ideas to least.

How do I keep track of all my research?

There are a number of handy ways to organize your research. Tools such as Zotero can help you keep track of important citations. For more detailed records, many people stick with the basic word processor or spreadsheet. Using a web-based version like Google Docs or iCloud allows you to access your documents anywhere while protecting your work from loss due to theft or technological failure.

Another good resource is Evernote, which allows you to take notes and organize them into categories. The basic app is free and can sync across a wide variety of platforms—from desktop to phone to tablet.

Tips

In order to help your reader follow the large amount of information in your lit review, it is helpful to include headings and brief summaries throughout.

Verb tense – whether you write your lit review in past or present tense – depends upon the conventions in your discipline, the material you are writing about and the structure of your review. The following handout has some detailed information on when to use present tense, past tense and present perfect tense, as well as some great examples:
http://writing.ucdavis.edu/docs/graduate/Lit_review_hum-ss.pdf

Examples

Examples of well-organized, extensive literature reviews can be found in the thesis project process books *Interpolated Editorial Design* by Adam Cristobal (MDes 2014), and *Design-based learning for the elementary school classroom* by Caylee Raber (MDes 2015), both available through the Emily Carr Library.

More information

The University of Toronto Writing Site:

<http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/specific-types-of-writing/literature-review>

The Writing Center at University of Wisconsin-Madison:

<http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/ReviewofLiterature.html>

Saint Mary's University:

<http://www.smu.ca/academics/literature-review.html>