

So, You Need to Write a Literature Review

What is a literature review anyway?

A lit review discusses material published on a particular topic and sometimes on that topic within a particular time period. It critically analyzes a portion of a published body of knowledge, and then summarizes and synthesizes the arguments and ideas of others. There are generally two reasons to do a lit review: a) to give yourself a good general overview of a topic, and b) to give readers of a larger research paper an overview of sources you have consulted while researching a topic—basically to prove that you did your homework.

How is a literature review formatted?

It varies from instructor to instructor, but generally there is an introduction, the body of the paper and then conclusions or recommendations.

- The introduction give a quick idea of the topic being addressed, gives the author's reason for reviewing these particular sources and tells how the review is organized.
- The body of the review organizes, summarizes and analyzes the articles and or books that you read.
- The conclusions circle back to your original argument in the introduction, present a conclusion of what you have learned about the topic, and sometimes make recommendations for further research in the area.

Steps for getting started

The best way to learn to write a literature review is to read a couple of examples. It's helpful if they are in your area of interest. Once you have decided you're your search terms are, and do a search, ProQuest, our customer-friendliest database, allows you to sort by Document Type, and if you click on More Options, you can scroll down the list and limit your search to just literature reviews. I've included one lit review in the folder for this assignment as an example. The search terms I used, in the advanced search window, were "wind turbines" and wildlife. My results included a review on the studies that have been conducted on wind turbines and their effect on bats in Europe. Skim through it and look how it is organized.

Getting started on your own review:

- Decide what your topic will be, then search the topic in one of our databases. NCSSM library staff are glad to help you with this step, and to help you decide which database might be best for your particular topic. You can find contact information for librarians at NCSSM at www.ncssm.edu/library While you're there, take a look at our hours, and note that we do have staff that work nights and weekends.
- Download and read articles about your topic. Summarize them and create the citations as you go. Several of our databases have a Cite button or link that will actually create the citation for you, which you can then copy and paste into your notes.

- Based on the articles you read, find a focus and organizational structure for your literature review. How does the research fit together? Do they present different solutions to a problem? Do they indicate a trend in the field or theory? Do they explain a problem or a field from different perspectives?

Writing the Literature Review

- Construct a thesis statement for your introduction that argues for a particular perspective you plan to use the articles to prove.
- Organize the body of the paper. Three ways to organize are chronologically, by theme or by methodology. You may find a different way that suits your material better.
- Cite your sources.
- Try not to use direct quotations unless how the author of the study or book presents material in such a way that it can't be paraphrased or there's no way to put it in your own words.
- Analyze and summarize at the end of paragraphs in which you cite more than one source to show how the references fit together to prove your thesis.
- Cite your sources.
- Analyze at the end of sections to show how the references fit together to prove your thesis.
- Bring it full circle. Write a conclusion that pulls your sections together and ties back to your thesis.
- Did I say cite your sources? If you didn't think of it, cite it!
- Try to finish up a few days before the assignment is due. Then leave it for a day or so and read what you wrote. Does it make sense? What do you need to revise?

If you want to get further down in the weeds with a very step-by-step guideline, Dr. Helen Mongan-Rallis of the Education Department at the University of Minnesota Duluth prepared one for her students, which we include with this assignment with her permission.

Sources Consulted While Writing This Guide

Driscoll, D.L. (2013, October 26.) *Purdue OWL: Social work literature review guidelines*. Retrieved from <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/666/01>

Monan-Rallis, H. (2006, November 17.) *Guidelines for writing a literature review*. Retrieved from <http://www.duluth.umn.edu/~hrallis/guides/researching/litreview.html>

The Writing Center, UNC. *Literature reviews*. Retrieved from <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/literature-reviews/>