

Literature Review

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A *review of the literature* is a type of integrated and sometimes critical analysis and synthesis of what a number of different sources have to say about a given topic or issue. Note that the phrase "*the literature*" reflects the assumption that there is likely some consensus that the sources you review are definitive and/or comprehensive. The format of a literature review may vary from discipline to discipline and from assignment to assignment. A review may be a self-contained unit--an end in itself--or a preface to and rationale for engaging in your own original research. A literature review is a required part of grant and research proposals and often a full chapter in theses and dissertations. In most cases, your review of the literature will follow the introductory section or chapter of what you are writing. Generally, the purpose of this review is to critically analyze a segment of a published body of knowledge through summary, classification, and comparison of prior research studies, literature reviews, and theoretical articles. The review is used to help define a focused problem to investigate and to narrow a research or conceptual space. A good literature review will do the following:

In the introduction

- Define or identify the general topic, issue, or area of concern you are writing about, thus providing an appropriate context for reviewing the literature.
- Point out overall trends in what has been published about the topic; or conflicts in theory, methodology, evidence, and conclusions; or gaps in research and scholarship; or a single problem or new perspective of immediate interest.
- Establish your reason (point of view) for reviewing the literature; explain the criteria to be used in analyzing and comparing that literature and the organization of your review (sequence); and, when necessary, state why certain literature is or is not included (scope).

In the body

- Group research studies and other types of sources (reviews, theoretical articles, case studies) according to common denominators such as qualitative versus quantitative approaches, conclusions of authors, specific purposes or objectives, and chronology.
- Summarize individual studies or articles with as much or as little detail as each merits according to its comparative importance in the literature, remembering that space (length) also typically denotes significance.
- Provide the reader with strong "umbrella" sentences at beginnings of paragraphs, "signposts" throughout, and brief "so what" summary sentences at intermediate points in the review to aid in understanding comparisons and analyses.

In the conclusion

- Summarize major contributions of significant studies and articles to the body of knowledge under review, maintaining the focus established in the introduction.
- evaluate the current "state of the art" for the body of knowledge reviewed, pointing out major methodological flaws or gaps in research, inconsistencies in theory and findings, and areas or issues pertinent to future study.
- Conclude by providing some insight into the relationship between the central topic of the literature review and a larger area of study such as a discipline, a scientific endeavor, or a profession.

Southeastern Writing Center
Celebrating the Writer's Voice
383 D. Vickers Hall
(985) 549-2076 ~ writing@selu.edu
http://www.selu.edu/acad_research/programs/writing_center