

Literature Reviews

A literature review may be defined as ***a search and evaluation of the available literature in a given subject area*** (RMIT University, 2008, para. 1). A literature review gives an overview of the literature.

The purposes of a literature review may include:

- To acquire an understanding of a topic.
- To show how a topic has already been researched.
- To integrate and summarise what is known about a topic.
- As a background to a major piece of research.

A good literature review collects what is known up to a point in time. It points out areas where prior studies or authors agree, where they disagree, and where major questions remain. It may also indicate the direction for future research.

What do you need to do?

Define the topic or research question.

Determine the focus.

Decide on the boundaries or parameters.

Gather relevant information. Research widely and objectively for the literature around your topic.

Read and make notes.

Record the specific source of your information.

Critically evaluate your readings to establish their relevance and credibility.

Check:

- Authority. Is the author an authority in this field of study?
- Validity. Where has this research come from? Is it a valid source? Is it peer reviewed? Especially important when using information from a website.
- Accuracy. What is the literature about? Is it accurate – how do you know? Is the same information referred to in other sources? What makes the information believable?
- Objectivity. Is there evidence of bias? Do the statistics match those in other publications? How do you know the data is true?
- Currency. How up to date is the information?
- Coverage. Is the information complete? What is the sample size? Is it adequate?
- Location. In which country was the article written? Is this location relevant to your research?

Read the literature, asking the following questions:

- What are the main ideas that the author is putting across?
- What are the main themes (topics) that are emerging?

Compare, contrast and analyse what the various authors are saying about the topic.
Make a half to one page summary of each source.

Structure : A literature review has three main parts.

1. Introduction.
2. Main body – usually divided into themes.
3. Conclusion.

Introduction:
5-10%
of the
word count.

Introduce the topic or research question: Define it; explain the relevance or importance of it and parameters of the review – what literature is and is not included, and why.

Introduce the themes (topics): Outline the chosen themes and offer a rationale for their choice. Explain the organisation (sequence) of the review.

Main Body:

80 – 90%
of the
word
count

Divide the body into key themes or concepts.

- Theme 1
- Theme 2
- Theme 3

The number of themes will depend on the length of the review. Refer to your assignment instructions and marking guide for guidance.

Attend to each theme in turn. Compare and contrast what the various authors suggest about your chosen themes, e.g.: *Smith (2005, pp. 5-8), Jones (2002, p. 65) and Brown (2001, p. 9) all examined the impact on families. While Smith and Jones regarded... favourably, Brown pointed out that.....actually worked against this. However, Brown's study was based on a very small sample size which may have affected the results.*

Use headings and sub-headings to divide themes, if necessary, and use examples and evidence to support the points you make.

Divide each theme into a series of paragraphs.

Each paragraph should start with a topic sentence and then provide details, evidence, examples and arguments related to the topic of that paragraph.

Conclusion:
5 – 10% of the
word count.

Summarise the main points of the review.

Depending on the purpose of the review, you will then:

- Summarise the major contributions of the literature
- evaluate the current position of the literature
- point out any major flaws or gaps in the literature
- outline issues pertinent to future study

Reference

RMIT University. (2008). *Literature review*. Retrieved February 7, 2008, from <http://www.rmit.edu.au/browse;ID=cdb4z3x5a44k;STATUS=A?QRY=literature%20review&STYPE=ENTIRE>