Writing a Literature Review

A literature review is an examination and presentation of the scholarly research on a topic. It highlights critical debates, integrates research findings to show important arguments, and sometimes evaluates oversights and deficiencies in the scholarship.

Getting Started
- What is my topic/research question?
- Why am I writing this review? What do I want it to reveal?
- What is the scope of my topic? How much of the topic can/should I cover?

Components of a Literature Review

The literature can include academic journal articles, books, historical documents, and government reports. While the literature review can include work from a diverse array of sources, academic sources are best.

Why write one?
- A literature review could itself be a single assignment (e.g., to provide a critical overview of existing research).
- A literature review might be part of a larger research project like a thesis or an ARP (e.g., to justify your own research).

Either way, your literature review must be *directly* related to your topic/research question. Background information can be useful when starting a literature review, but you may find that there is actually very little general, or "background," work completed at a scholarly level. Scholarly work will tend to be very specific, focused, and make arguments on narrow topics. If the literature review is part of your own research, conducting it will help you determine what the major debates are in the field before you weigh in.

Goals of a Literature Review
- Determine the key arguments and findings related to your topic. Who are the scholars? What are the broader patterns?
- Connect the research with the pertinent underpinning theories.
- Focus on shared findings/agreements or inconsistencies/disagreements.
- Locate gaps in the research. Where are the opportunities for further research?

Organizing a Literature Review

Whether your literature review is a stand-alone assignment or a chapter of a larger project, it needs to have an introduction, a body, and a conclusion.

Introduction
- Background information to introduce the topic and narrow the discussion down from the broader

subject to the specific topic.
- An explanation of the significance of the topic/review.
- A statement of your research question and purpose.

In your introduction, you may need to:
- Define key terms, technical terms, jargon.
- Explain how you conducted your literature search/selection.

Body
- Organize your review by theme/subtopic (using headings/subheadings), **not** by individual contributions.
- Reference several works within each section to draw patterns of scholarship.

Tips for writing the body:
- Write clear topic sentences (first sentences of paragraphs) that state the main idea of the paragraph.
- Use transitions to show relationships between authors' findings/arguments.
- Choose appropriate verbs. For example, the word "found" can be used to describe the results of studies or experiments but not when describing theoretical research.
- Do not cite an entire paragraph's content with a single citation at the end of the paragraph; instead, cite throughout and use signal phrases (e.g., authors' names (date) + verb) to introduce research.
- Use quotation marks (" ") around any words you copy from sources.

Conclusion
- "Summarize the answers to the research question as clearly as the literature allows" (Zorn & Campbell, 2006, p. 178).
- Suggest areas for further research or create a connection to your own research. If the literature review is part of a larger project, say where in the field you've identified a place to intervene with your research.

Online Resources

- University of Guelph's Writing a Literature Review
- St. Mary's University's Writing a Literature Review
- University of Toronto's The Literature Review and a Few Tips on Conducting It

Reference

Zorn, T., and Campbell, N. (2006). Improving the writing of literature reviews through a literature integration exercise. *Business Communication Quarterly*, *69*(2), 172-183. DOI: 10.1177/1080569906287960