Writing a literature review

What is a literature review?

A literature review is a critical analysis of the literature, or research, related to a specific topic or research question.

Here are some of the ways it has been described:

- A literature review is “an extensive critical review of the extant literature on the research topic”.
  
  (Clare & Hamilton, 2003, p. 8)

- A literature review “provides the reader with a picture … of the state of knowledge and the main questions in the subject area being investigated”.

  (Bell, 1999, p. 93)

- A literature review “contains a critical analysis and the integration of information from a number of sources, as well as a consideration of any gaps in the literature and possibilities for future research”.

  (Manalo & Trafford, 2004, p. 45)

A literature review might be:

- A “stand alone” review article
  - Review articles provide an overview of recent research focused on an issue or problem. Review articles are often published in academic journals.

- A section or chapter of a research proposal or research report
  - A research proposal or report will usually include a literature review near the beginning of the document (often as a separate chapter) to provide a context and rationale for the research.
  
  - This “early stage” literature review is, of course, not the only place in a research report that literature is discussed. All research reports will incorporate the literature into other sections as well (e.g. introduction, method, discussion). In some disciplines, the “literature” cannot be easily separated from the research being reported on and will be incorporated seamlessly throughout the whole document.
What is the purpose of a literature review?

In terms of what a literature review text tells a reader, all types of literature reviews have some similar purposes. The key purpose that distinguishes an “early stage” literature review from other kinds of reviews is its role as a justification for the proposed research.

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<th>A “stand alone” review article</th>
<th>An “early stage” literature review in a proposal or research report</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provides a theoretical context or framework for the research being undertaken.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Evaluates and synthesises existing literature related to a specific issue (i.e. shows overlaps and gaps, implications, limitations). In other words, creates a “picture” about what is known and unknown in the research area.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluates and synthesises existing literature related to a research question or objective (i.e. shows key themes, overlaps, gaps, implications, significance, limitations). In other words, creates a “picture” about what is known and unknown in the research area.</td>
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<td>Might make recommendations for further research to address “gaps”.</td>
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<td>Clearly identifies the “gap” in the body of knowledge that the proposed research will attempt to fill.</td>
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<td>Provides a rationale or justification for the research being proposed (in a proposal) or reported on (in a research report).</td>
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We can think about the purpose of a literature review from two perspectives: the researcher and the reader. In this resource, the focus is on what the final literature review text tells a reader. To find out more about how the literature review process helps a researcher, see the resources listed at the end of this document.
Writing a literature review:

Creating the overall form or structure

The structure of a literature review will vary from one discipline to another, but there are some common elements:

- A literature review has an overall logical structure (e.g. conceptual, topical, methodological, chronological).

- The overall structure is focused on “themes” or “ideas”, rather than on individual authors or studies. In other words, you should synthesise the sources into a coherent text, not write a series of summaries.

- In a literature review near the beginning of a proposal or research report, the purpose is to convince the reader that the research is necessary; this means you need to develop a clear line of argument that leads the reader to the research question or hypothesis. If your literature review is well written, the reader should be able to predict your research question/hypothesis before s/he reaches that point in the text.

- In a literature review near the beginning of a proposal or research report, there is likely to be a “general” to “specific” (or “broad” to “narrow”) flow of ideas. In structuring the review, you are likely to move from making general points about a variety of studies towards more detailed discussion of key studies closely linked to your proposed research.

Incorporating, or “weaving in”, the literature

The literature review should be written so that the writer’s “voice” is clear. In other words, you should take on an active role as the writer. It is not sufficient to simply describe or summarise ideas from the literature; you need to use the literature to make points or to locate your ideas in relation to the existing body of knowledge.

To make your “voice” clear, you need to:

- Synthesise or integrate the literature
- Comment on, or critique, the literature

Analysing examples of literature reviews

The best way to develop a clear idea about the nature of literature reviews in your discipline is to read some examples before you write your own literature review.

Look especially at how the writer has:

- Developed an overall logical structure,
- Linked the individual pieces of literature,
- Used different citation forms, reporting verbs, evaluative words and phrases, and tenses to express voice.

(The LTL Learning Advisors can help you to do this analysis.)
Resources on writing a literature review

For examples of literature reviews:

- theses/dissertations in your discipline
- published literature reviews in your discipline. (NB. In some of the databases that Lincoln subscribes to, you can limit your search to review articles; look for the option under Document Type or Publication Type.)
- annotated extracts in published resources (See those marked ** in the resource list below.)

For advice on literature searching and keeping bibliographic records:

Talk to one of the Learning Advisors (Information Delivery), or look at our website

For general advice on writing a literature review (including the process of developing a literature review, the structure and style):


Library, Teaching and Learning, Lincoln University. (2014). Writing a critique. Also available on line.

Study & Learning Centre, RMIT. (2005). Literature Review. Available at: http://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/lsu/content/2_AssessmentTasks/04literature.htm **


Need more advice?

This resource is intended as a general introduction to writing a literature review article or a literature review for a proposal or research report.

To find out more about the specific requirements in your discipline, talk to your course examiner or supervisor.

For more detailed advice on writing literature reviews, attend a workshop, individual appointment or drop-in time. Visit our website at http://ltl.lincoln.ac.nz/ or ask at the Service Point