

13.

## THE LITERATURE REVIEW

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### Learning Objectives

- explain the purpose of a literature review
- distinguish between two types of literature review
- apply strategies for writing a literature review

## What is a Literature Review?

First, don't be confused by the word "literature." Literature typically means short stories, novels, plays, and poems, but in this context, the word "literature" means the published information on a specific topic, information typically found in scholarly journals. A literature review is a presentation of that published information; it tells readers what is generally known about a topic. In academic writing, learning what's already been discovered about a topic is a key part of the research process. You study what experts in the field have discovered about a topic with the goal of building upon the previous research. A literature review shows that you have consulted the experts to educate yourself on the topic.

Think of the literature review as a report of what you learned from your research. Typically, you'll learn which ideas or theories have been generally accepted and which ideas and theories experts debate, and you'll discover possibilities for further research on the topic. To learn all of that, you'll skim through many sources, select those that seem most relevant to your topic, read these sources, and take lots of notes. When you write up your findings, you'll present your notes in a way that teaches readers some of what you've learned.

The literature review, then, is similar to a research paper. In fact, many students struggle to see how a literature review is different from a research paper. After all, the research papers they wrote (and earned good grades on) in high school were reports of what they found in the sources they consulted, but no one called those papers literature reviews. High school research papers, and maybe even the research papers you write in

some college classes, don't require much more than an overview of the topic you're researching. In most college classes, though—especially in upper-level courses—professors expect you to go beyond repeating what others have said about a topic; they want you to offer your own original idea about the topic, an idea that grows out of the studying good, scholarly sources about the topic. That's the difference between a research paper and a literature review: a research paper offers something original whereas a literature review reports on what others have said about a topic.

In many disciplines, a literature review is required as part of a research essay. A sociologist, for example, might want to research the topic of anxiety among teenagers so he or she will study what others have already discovered about anxiety among teenagers, looking for gaps in what's been discovered or controversies that haven't been resolved. Based on what the sociologist discovers, he or she will formulate an original idea for investigating the topic further. That investigation will generate new evidence that will add to the wealth of knowledge about teens and anxiety. When it's time to write up the results of the investigation, one section of the paper will be the literature review—the overview of what's already known about the topic.

Sometimes, a literature review is a stand-alone paper. A professor might assign a literature review in hopes of helping students gain a comprehensive understanding of a topic or issue. Typically, a stand-alone literature review will conclude by discussing what else needs to be discovered about a topic, in other words, topics for further research.

Whether it's part of a longer research essay or a stand-alone essay, the literature review presents information from sources but doesn't argue a position or offer new insights into the topic. The goal is to educate readers about the topic or issue.

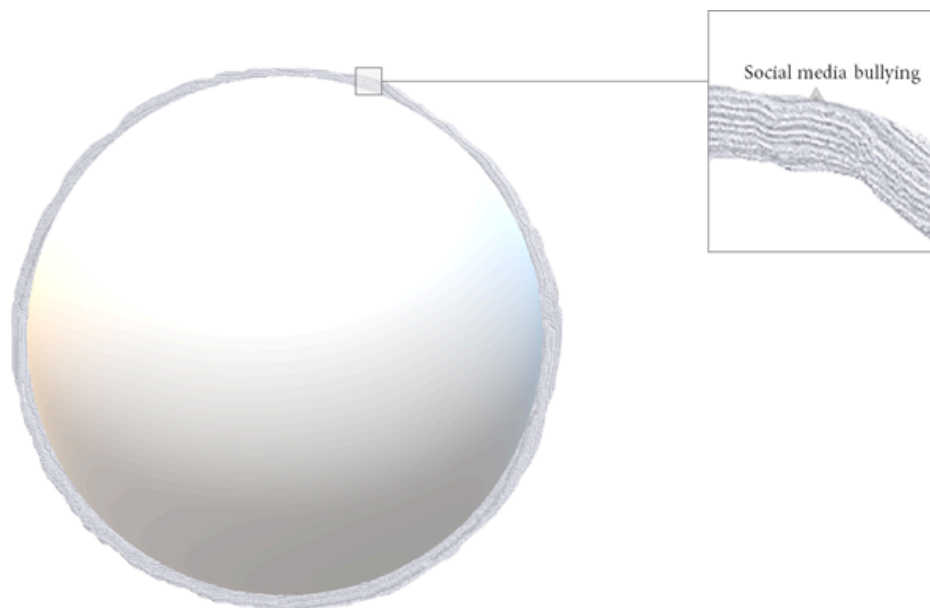
## Why Write Literature Reviews?

Simply put, the purpose of a literature review is to recognize and track the previous knowledge upon which research is built. In the thousands of years that humans have been observing their surroundings and making discoveries, we have collectively built a sizeable body of knowledge. *Homo erectus* (purportedly) created the first controlled fire. Likely this happened by observing the aftermaths of lightning strikes, and then discovering the result of friction between organic matter, or experimenting with colliding various rocks together. They certainly did not have the organized process we have today for expanding the body of knowledge, but they made a momentous contribution nonetheless – controlled fire allowed for a considerable list of other possibilities within civilization (forging weapons, cooking, etc). Today, we don't typically stumble upon discoveries as we did during early civilization. Instead, we use **the scientific method**, controlled experiments, or logically constructed theories from previous observations to continue expanding the body of knowledge at a rapidly cumulative rate.

The body of knowledge is “the complete set of concepts, terms and activities that make up a professional domain, as defined by the relevant learned society or professional association” (Oliver, 2012, p. 3). In short,

it's what we know about any discipline. When taken collectively, the body of knowledge is everything the scientific community knows about the world. Some areas of the body of knowledge are well developed, and others are simply beginning. We know a lot more about mathematics and chemistry, for example, than we do for behavioral economics or mental illness. Whatever the discipline or topic, everything together represents an important platform from which to expand the body of knowledge.

A good analogy for this body of knowledge is a sphere. At any given point in time, this sphere contains everything the world knows about all disciplines. As more studies are conducted and science advances, the sphere expands. In most disciplines the expansion is a small, incremental bump. For example, if you conducted a study on the “impact of social media bullying on middle school students’ mental health,” the results of that study would create a small bump on the body of knowledge. Conversely, in cases where ground breaking research fundamentally changes humankind or understanding of the universe, the bump would protrude substantially. Nobel prizes are awarded for these types of advances; such is the case in physics, medicine, and economics. Think discovery of the radio wave, or contributions to organ transplant science, or Keynesian economics. Therefore, the sphere representing the body of knowledge is not perfectly smooth, but rather bumpy and perhaps organically lopsided at times as disciplines advance at different rates. For this reason, it's less like a pool ball or balloon, and more like an orange with all of its imperfections, organic surface bumps, and small craters.



## Adding a bump

The “literature review” stems from the **scientific method**, which is the standard process by which we learn about our world. The scientific method has five basic steps: define the question to investigate, make

predictions, gather data, observe, draw conclusions. This basic framework is taught to fifth graders working on a science fair project and is used by scientists conducting studies on nano-particle acceleration. The first step, defining the question, is the most crucial in expanding the body of knowledge because we cannot make predictions in fields too advanced for our thinking, or upon those which we have almost no understanding. In the sphere analogy, this would be tantamount to creating a new circle or bump which lies in space, not connected to the existing mass. Imagine Da Vinci trying to grasp helicopter avionics with his 15th century crude design of the helicopter, or Edison delving into laser research immediately after discovering artificial light creation. These connections wouldn't happen because the human mind is limited in conceiving of advancements too far removed from their existing reality. Advancement takes time for societies and academic communities to digest, and scientists need time to ruminate on new possibilities.

The sphere analogy allows us to visualize this progress of science, discovery, and knowledge creation. Solid, acceptable research must be built on the existing, contemporary understanding of the world. In fact, the academic community values the scientific method so much that it would reject findings of a research study if the scholar did not recognize previous developments and describe how that research expanded the body of knowledge. This is the purpose of the literature review: to help us as well as our readers see where on the body of knowledge we are making our bump.

## Two kinds of Literature Review

The “literature review” is often a source of frustration and confusion for many students. They usually have two questions: 1) what is the literature, and 2) what is a literature review? The answer to the first question is simple. The literature (sometimes called the academic literature) is the written findings from all of the studies ever conducted and written up. In modern academia and scientific community, the findings come in the form of peer-reviewed research articles published in **scholarly or “peer reviewed” journals**. Peer reviewed means that after completing a research study, the scholar sends a first draft of the article, called a manuscript at this stage, to other scholars in that field. These scholars or “peers” have one role: to validate, critique, and ultimately accept or reject the study that was conducted. For this reason, the process is called peer-reviewed research. The idea behind peer review is that experts in the field will look at existing knowledge and determine if in fact the research study was successful in advancing the body of knowledge.

The feedback on the manuscript is then given to the scholar so they can revise and fix any issues and re-submit. Once the final draft is accepted, the manuscript becomes a published article in a “peer-reviewed” journal, and hence a part of the accepted literature. Those published manuscripts, which have been painstakingly reviewed, are considered the “literature” that scholars need to consult. In upper-level and graduate classes, magazine articles, news outlets, blogs, and online content such as Wikipedia are not considered valid sources of information for the systematic way we advance scientific knowledge. Some disciplines will accept books or book chapters as valid scientific output, especially if a book or chapter is peer-

reviewed, but most professors expect students to consult scholarly journals for their research; scholarly journals are the “literature” of a literature review.

What about less advanced classes, like a first-year writing class? Are students expected to consult scholarly or peer-reviewed journals when writing a literature review? In some cases, yes, your professor will tell you that articles published in a commercial magazine like *The Atlantic Monthly* are not scholarly enough to include in a literature review. Others, though, will not expect first-year students to consult only peer-reviewed journals. Because these journals are written by experts for experts, they are often too difficult for the non-expert to comprehend. In a first-year writing class, therefore, the “literature” could include magazine articles, TED Talks, books, even online sources.

Whatever the literature consists of, the literature review establishes the baseline and foundation for research. Even if you are writing papers for a class, rather than submitting your work to a peer-reviewed journal, you should follow the same process and discipline when conducting research.

The second question that students ask (what is a literature review?) requires a more nuanced response. There are two principle types of literature reviews. The first type of literature review is a section of a research paper that justifies how the project advances existing knowledge. The second is an article unto itself. There is a slightly different purpose in the latter as it entails more synthesis of contemporary research, and provides a more explicit exhortation on future research direction of the field.

## The literature review as a section of a research project

The structure of a research report or journal article stems from the scientific method and most commonly entails the introduction, literature review, method, results, and discussion sections:

- The **Introduction** describes the importance of the study, provides context, and tells the community why this particular phenomenon should be studied. This is the sales pitch of the article and the part that compels others to continue reading.
- The **Literature Review** traces the roots of the theory or knowledge the project is attempting to advance, with citations to the literature consulted.
- The **Method** section describes how the research was conducted so that peers can either replicate the study in future attempts, or can critique the robustness or validity of the research (by means of the peer-review process).
- The **Results** section is usually the shortest part of a paper in that it simply reports the outcome.
- The **Discussion** section brings everything to a point by articulating how the study did what it set out to do, and how it advances the particular theory or research train that it intended to. This section also outlines any limitations of the study (size or scope, for example), as well as maps out a logical future research agenda for peer-scholars to follow.

Let's go back to our social media bullying example. If we were to conduct a study on social media bullying in schools we might first acknowledge Social Cognition Theory (how individuals learn from each other), as well as the Theory of Planned Behavior (how we act on our intentions), as well as any studies that investigated the impact of bullying. The literature review can be constructed using a chronological approach (start with the first theory you are referencing and concluding with more recent trends) or a thematic approach (put the studies you are citing into themes and describe those themes). Studies which identified ground breaking theory that many scholars after them use as the basis of their work are called **seminal works**. Good examples of this are Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs or Skinner's Operant Conditioning Theory (sometimes these seminal authors are called the Godfather of their discipline). When writing the literature review, the task is to provide a logical flow of theories and historical progression of understanding within the field. The literature review makes the case for why the theory you have chosen is relevant and most appropriate and provides justification for your own research by demonstrating where research is needed to "fill in the gap."

Take this excerpt from Helens-Hart, et. al, (2022) for example.<sup>1</sup> They begin their literature review section on reality TV with this qualifying statement:

"In this section, we present an overview of research on reality television programming (RTP), Undercover Boss, and organizational dissent. Through this discussion, we show how our work is situated within the larger research context and justify the need for continued research." (p. 3).

## The literature review as a stand-alone paper

The literature review as a stand-alone paper serves a slightly different purpose. Instead of setting up the context for your own research, a stand-alone literature review **synthesizes** the most recent findings on a topic and provides a roadmap for future research on the topic. The goal is typically to note recent discoveries in a given field so that other scholars can consider whether they want to add to the growing research. With this kind of literature review, the job of the scholar is to note common themes or issues in the emerging literature and to provide commentary on what future research in the field needs to focus on. This could be anticipation or prediction of where the field will likely go, or where the field should focus its investigation, based on social, economic, or political need. For example, a stand-alone literature review on social media bullying might want

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1. Helens-Hart, Rose, et al. "Dissent in Reality: A Commentary on Representations of Organizational Dissent on Undercover Boss." *International Journal of Business Communication*, vol. 60, no. 3, July 2023, pp. 1025–46. EBSCOhost, <https://web-s-ebSCOhost-com.libraryproxy.tulsacc.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=d42dde44-0927-42fc-9181-89351c2ec72f%40redis&bddata=JnNpdGU9ZWWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#>

to examine social media use during the isolation period of the COVID pandemic—something that needs to be investigated further. The stand-alone literature review gives scholars shoulders to stand on after notching the themes and summarizing the progress in the field.

## How to Write a Literature Review

Whether part of a research paper or a stand-alone paper, the literature review needs to present a well-organized and engaging account of the literature you studied. What literature should you study? That depends upon your research topic. If you choose to write about depression in teenagers, you’re going to have to study hundreds and hundreds of sources to get an overview of the previous research on the topic. Instead, you should begin with the general topic, skim lots of sources, and figure out a way to **narrow your focus**. For example, you might research whether social media contributes to depression in teenage girls. With a more focused topic, you’ll be able to study fewer sources in order to become educated on your topic.

Some students worry that they won’t find enough sources or have enough to say if they choose a narrow topic. “Keep the topic broad,” they may think, “and I’ll have a lot to write to fill ten pages!” The problem is that with a vague topic, you can’t possibly educate yourself fully on what the literature says. Search a library database for articles on teenage depression, and you’ll get thousands of results. You can’t read thousands of articles in a few weeks! A literature review should reflect a thorough investigation into your topic, and you can’t be thorough if you have a huge topic and a limited amount of time to write. The focus of a literature review, therefore, like the focus of a research paper, should be sufficiently narrow.

Once you have discovered many sources on your topic, you can begin reading them more carefully and taking notes. Anyone immersed in a research project will absorb so much information that they won’t know which sources made which points, so *note-taking is crucial to writing a good literature review*. Most researchers develop a good system for keeping track of information from sources and for recording their own thought about the information they’re gathering. They will also gather much more information than they need to write a good literature review. The idea at this stage is to cast a wide net and gather up as much information on the topic as possible.

At some point, though, you’ll need to stop and present your findings—or at least some of what you discovered. To present your findings in an organized and easy-to-read essay, you need to make connections among the notes you’ve taken. Literature reviews are not written as summaries of various sources. Instead, you as the writer need to figure out how to **synthesize** information you’ve discovered. What are common themes, ideas, points of agreement/disagreement? In a literature review that’s part of a larger paper, you’ll want to figure out how the information you’ve gathered connects to the thesis you want to present. In a stand-alone literature review, your thesis will be the big “take aways” from your research that you want to share. You won’t be able to share everything you’ve learned from the research, but if you’ve taken good notes, you’ll have many options for what to focus on.



To organize the notes around your thesis or focus, you should create an outline. How will you present the different themes or ideas you've discovered? Are some themes more obvious than others? Can you begin with points of agreement and move onto points of disagreement? Maybe you should organize the points in order of importance, beginning with what is least important and concluding with the most important point. Again, a good literature review doesn't just summarize each source separately in a body paragraph; it's organized according to the themes or ideas you've discovered, and each body paragraph includes references to more than one source. How can you present the information in a way that will engage readers and help them understand the topic better? That's the main question to ask when outlining your literature review.

You should also make sure you're citing all information that needs to be cited. In a literature review, most of the sentences are going to be paraphrases, quotations, and/or summaries, so most of the sentences will need to be cited. That's why note-taking is so important. If you don't take good notes, you run the risk of plagiarizing. For example, some documentation formats, such as MLA, require page numbers in the citation for paginated sources, so if you didn't write page number in your notes, you might not be able to use the information you recorded. Or maybe you remember something from a source but forgot to record it in your notes. You can't incorporate information that you remember because a)you won't have the citation to include in the essay, and 2)you might not remember accurately.

As with any essay, a literature review should undergo revision and careful editing. In revising the essay, you may discover that you need more information, so you'll go back to your sources and take more notes. Or you may find that you're trying to cover too much information, so you'll need to delete a theme you wanted to discuss. When editing, you'll need to pay attention to citations and the works cited page. Most importantly, as you draft, revise, and edit, think about your readers and your purpose for writing. You are advancing knowledge on a particular topic, to an audience of smart readers. Teach them. Engage them.

### Key Takeaways

- Literature reviews are not papers about short stories, poems, etc.
- Literature reviews are not arguments or research papers
- Literature reviews synthesize information from sources rather than presenting each source separately in its own body paragraph
- Literature reviews present an organized, engaging overview of what's already been discovered about a topic
- Writing a good literature review means taking good and copious notes