Tips for Writing a Literature Review

What is a Literature Review?

The Literature Review overviews, analyzes, and sometimes critiques relevant previous research. It lays the groundwork for the original research presented in a thesis/dissertation by demonstrating that the research fills a "gap" in the literature and/or contributes something new or has implications for specific areas of study within the field.

A Literature Review is not…

- It's not a list of **all** of the sources you read. (You'll read more than you need!)
- It's not just a **summary** of the existing research on a topic.
    - Instead it **analyzes and synthesizes the findings, and guides the reader** through the most relevant previous work as a way of framing your own new research.
- It does not present studies in **alphabetical order or chronological order**.
    - The sources should instead be **organized based on commonalities** in their theoretical approach, research question, methods, or findings, moving toward demonstrating the need for your own new research and new contribution.
- It should not **only** include sources that support your view.
    - Also **include scholarly work that you will critique**. Including countering views can help to create a complete picture of the scholarly conversation.

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➢ **Start with a strong research question**

A strong research question should be:

1. **Narrow** and specific
    - It might start out broad; you can continue to narrow it as you do more research.
2. **Original** in some way
    - If your question is not "new," you could use new a method to address an old question; the application of the methodology itself could be a new contribution.
3. **Answerable** with your data (or with your research)
    - If your question is not answerable with data/sources you have access to, consider narrowing it, qualifying it, or framing it in a different way.

➢ **Refine your research question (and thesis/claim) as you do research**

Once you start to research the literature on your topic, you might discover that…

…you can't find enough sources with research relevant to your topic.
- This could be a good sign that there is a "gap" in the literature that needs to be filled.
- Try broadening your topic/search to a larger demographic, or meet with the librarian!

…your exact question/topic has already been explored and published about.
- To make your question "new," try narrowing it by looking at only a demographic/topic that intersects with another one, e.g., don't just investigate _____, instead research _____ among _____.

…you're finding more relevant sources than you'll ever have time to read!
- Try conducting multiple library website (and Google Scholar) searches, each one using different narrow/specific search terms for different aspects of your topic.
- Don't worry about reading every single source: instead pick and choose the most relevant. You can read only the abstracts to decide which articles to focus on, then skim less relevant sections of your sources instead of reading every word.
- To feel less overwhelmed, **organize your sources as you read**. (See reverse side.)

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➢ **Organize your sources as you read**

As you do research, keep track of your sources, and **organize them into groups** based on commonalities in their theoretical approach, research question, methods, or findings.

- Identify a system that works for you: a spreadsheet, Zotero/RefWorks, index cards, etc.

For each source, if relevant, keep track of:

Types of sources:		
Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
Evaluate and consider:		
Purpose	Audience	Scope

- All source information you will need for the References list
- The scholars' main claims and/or main findings
- Methods used (when relevant)
- Any assumptions you identify that scholars have made (which you might agree with or critique)
- Any flaws in the methodology or lack of sufficient evidence to support a theoretical claim
- Page numbers and content of specific phrases or statistics you might want to quote/cite

As you read through the literature and add to your catalog of sources, think about how you might want to group, order, and present them in your literature review.

➢ **Outline your structure before you write, re-organize as you write**

One possible ordering of a Literature Review:	Tips for grouping and analyzing sources:
1. Overview some of the broader background or foundational research in your field.	• Group together sources that used the same methodology or had similar findings.
2. Analyze and critique research in a sub-area of your field that is related to your topic.	• **Make evaluative judgments** about the studies rather than just describing them. o Critique a study's method of sampling, e.g., if the results are not generalizable.
3. Analyze and critique research in another sub-area, or a more specific, narrow sub-field.	o Critique its conclusions, e.g., if there is insufficient evidence to support them.
4. Devote space to discussing opposing views or points of contention in the field.	• Explain relationships among theories/studies (which ones arose from which others).
5. Devote space to interdisciplinary research, or research from another related field of study.	• Group together several sources that adopted the same theoretical framework, or several sources that "agree." Also group together several sources that "disagree." Compare and contrast them, and evaluate which side is more convincing.
6. Highlight the "gaps" in the literature, e.g., "Although many studies have focused on _____, very few studies to date have focused specifically on [your research question]."	

➢ **Don't devote equal space to every source**

- You might devote 2 or 3 paragraphs to discussing just one **key source**.
- In contrast, to make a minor point, you might **cite some sources only once**.
  o E.g., cite 4 sources together in one sentence:

  Several studies have identified a positive correlation between meditation and stress reduction (Berkowitz et al., 2003; Derryberry & Reed, 2005, 2007; Rothbart, 2003).

> Alphabetical order, separated by semicolons

➢ **Don't assume the internet will correctly format your References**

- Double-check all of your APA formatting manually, even if you're using Zotero/EndNote to generate References. The Writing Center tutors and online resources are there to help!