



## WRITING THE LITERATURE REVIEW

The Literature Review literally “reviews” the various literature or research relevant to a particular area of study. More commonly known as the “lit review,” it can be a daunting academic genre as it requires a fair amount of cognitive activity. The lit review could be considered the quintessential graduate writing task as it initially demonstrates one’s researching skills, then critical reading and interpretation, and later illustrating connections among researchers. In graduate school, the literature review prevails as both a class assignment and as a section of a project paper because it requires writer writers to organize, synthesize, and evaluate research.

As in any academic writing, literature reviews are organized around their purpose for writing. As a class assignment, the lit review requires students to research and articulate how their thesis and its elements are represented in that research. These “research essays” have students synthesize past & current research of a topic and its thesis. The assignment also helps cultivate learning and awareness of the field and its discourse for writers who are relatively new to the field. As one moves through the academic strata, the lit review establishes the validity and relevance of one’s research study.

In broadest of terms, the literature review presents an overview of the research that support your prevailing thesis or research questions outlined in your proposal or final project (thesis or dissertation). Referencing your literature/research here has two prominent values. First, you prove to your reader that your thesis and its topics are grounded in the professional literature, thus you’re contributing to an already established field of study. Another value is that by contextualizing your thesis you’re creating a foundation for the future study. In the academic



world, one enters a community of like-minded scholars through understanding what's already been done, and the review of literature establishes your place at the table.

## Your Skills as a Researcher

The lit review very consciously reveals your researching skills and your awareness of the field as you enter into inquiry of a topic that should be personally meaningful and empowering in your academic community. We research for multiple reasons in academic writing, your purpose here is present how your focus and thesis are supported within the research by interpreting others' writing/research and drawing connections to other research. Essentially, you might consider that the lit review actually depicts a community of scholars in which research begets other research. You'll probably find an evolution at work with your researching, and you should begin to identify the seminal scholarship and researchers. As you move more to final project writing, you'll be more discerning in using peer-reviewed articles as well as primary sources.

## Your Audience:

The academic audience values assertions only in how they supported by others, and so it's important to acknowledge that the most successful lit reviews are those that synthesize and analyze the prevailing literature for the reader. Your reader will expect a facility with the lexicon and use of citations. Your reader will also want you to summarize and interpret information rather than rely solely on direct quotes. In many ways, the more sophisticated the context, the more self-effacing the writer (See [Writing for a Reader](#)).



Allow yourself to learn and grow as a thinker and writer in the field. Your early literature reviews might engage readers in a structured survey of the various themes related to your focus and purpose. Unless you are advised by a faculty member, do not simply copy and paste annotations from an annotated bibliography assignment. This approach reflects a lack of organizing research around themes and requires your reader to do the hard work of finding relationships within the literature.

## Writing the Review of Literature

The most familiar approach to a literature review takes a narrative structure in which past research is synthesized around salient themes found relevant to your study. The analogy of the documentary might be helpful in illustrating how research is presented. Using this analogy, lit reviews also tell a story with representative and current research that support the themes/subtopics presented in the research questions. You are not offering your own empirical research here, but are illustrating to your audience that what you plan to study is legitimate and recognized in the field.

### Getting Started:

One way to present a complex review of the research is to list the relevant themes and organize your research accordingly. Then once you have that outline, begin writing sentences summarizing research, referring to data, identifying connections with other researchers under each theme heading. Your summary statements should interpret prevailing arguments/premises with citations of researchers.

Consider creating a list of synonyms ahead of time for the common terms (nouns and verbs) you'll be using. You want easy access to the



operative language rather than delaying the initial writing process of your rough draft. Keep the list handy as it helps with revision.

### **Rhetorical Tasks of the Review of Literature:**

- To summarize major themes of the research through a representative presentation
- To synthesize the research around themes of the research questions or thesis
- To interpret others' studies and evaluate their value
- To establish the validity of your plan of study and its topics as "seen" within the current research.
- To identify any gaps of the research.
- To convince your reader that your research represents current and credible resources & studies; if required, peer reviewed literature.

## **PREPARING TO WRITE**

### **Phase 1: Emerging**

- Explore and Identify relevant literature
- Include "major works/researchers": don't feel compelled to read everything.
- Critically review material and identify recurrent points
- Cultivate an awareness of the key researchers and include them intentionally



## Phase 2: Synthesizing

- Identify themes and Organize research to related themes of your study
- Relate back to research questions

## Phase 3: Evaluating

- Identify patterns and connections between researchers
- Examine data for its validity

## Create an outline organized with the following sections in mind

- Your introduction serves to:
  - acknowledge the importance of the topic
  - set the stage of the key concepts and terms
  - explain your plan for the review: its focus, themes, and organization
  - Compose a direction statement that will create an outline of for the lit review. E.G.: This literature review will review current trends of using EMD therapy as a psychological intervention techniques for returning soldiers with PTSD.
- The body of the literature review serves to:
  - present a chronology of the field (EG, Early studies to more current studies within each theme.
  - identify salient themes and patterns of the research
  - summarize the research and analyze findings
  - integrate data and quotes as they are relevant



- make connections between studies
- The conclusion might
  - identify any gaps of existing literature
  - offer considerations for future studies

### **Format Components:**

As researchers and members of a particular field, you should attend to the conventions and stylistic expectations. This is the non-negotiable feature of your writing. Just as we have conventions in social discourse, your written discourse is replete of standards and practices. And your compliance helps your reader feel confident that you understand these genre and stylistic criteria.

- Include all criteria expected of your reader (title page, pagination, etc)
- Use headings strategically (and correctly) as they support readability.
- Include a balance of citations and direct quotes/data
- References or Works Cited pages

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