

Literature Review

Not to be confused with a book review, a literature review surveys scholarly articles, books and other sources (e.g. dissertations, conference proceedings) relevant to a particular issue, area of research, or theory, providing a description, summary, and critical evaluation of each work.

Audience

Literature reviews can have different types of audiences, so consider why and for whom you are writing your review.

Theses and Dissertations: A lot of literature reviews are written as a chapter for a thesis or dissertation, so the audience will want to know in what way your research is important and original. A literature review should convince the audience of the significance and worthiness of the proposed project.

For a Course: When you are writing a literature review for a course, you should show your professor that you understand what research has been done, giving you a base of knowledge. In this case, you may not need to focus as much on proving where the gaps in knowledge lie, but rather, that you know what the major areas of study and key ideas are.

Questions a Literature Review Should Answer:

Asking these questions will help you sift through your sources and organize your literature review. The literature review organizes the previous research in the light of what you are planning to do in your own project.

- What's been done in this topic area to date? What are the significant discoveries, key concepts, arguments, and/or theories that scholars have put forward? Which are the important works?
- On which particular areas of the topic has previous research concentrated? Have there been developments over time? What methodologies have been used?

- Are there any gaps in the research? Are there areas that haven't been looked at closely yet, but which should be? Are there new ways of looking at the topic?
- Are there improved methodologies for researching this subject?
- What future directions should research in this subject take?
- How will your research build on or depart from current and previous research on the topic? What contribution will your research make to the field?

Stages of a Literature Review

Similar to primary research, development of the literature review requires four stages:

- Problem formulation—which topic or field is being examined and what are its component issues?
- Literature search—finding materials relevant to the subject being explored.
- Data evaluation—determining which literature makes a significant contribution to the understanding of the topic.
- Analysis and interpretation—discussing the findings and conclusions of pertinent literature.

Why Do We Do a Literature Review?

- To see what has and has not been investigated.
- To develop general explanations for observed variations in a behavior or phenomenon.
- To identify potential relationships between concepts and to identify researchable hypotheses.
- To learn how others have defined and measured key concepts.
- To identify data sources that other researchers have used.
- To develop alternative research projects.
- To discover how a research project is related to the work of others.