The “Literature Review” section does more than show that you have done your homework; it shows that you understand the nuances of the scholarship that supports your research and that you know what matters in the field and why. This handout will help you create a comprehensive literature review that accurately reflects your knowledge of your field of study.

Purpose

Remember in writing this section that you are not including everything ever written on your topic but are guiding the reader through a survey of research that is significant for your study. Usually you will focus on work done within the past 10 years. Show readers where your research fits within your field, why it is significant, and whose work you will be building on or challenging.

Getting Started

Selecting Sources

Select sources based on interest and relevance. Utilize primary sources, including textbooks, professional reports, and academic journals, that have been peer reviewed by experts in the field, as well as secondary sources, including magazines and newspapers. Secondary sources are most useful when creating a general outline for a literature review; however, use information from primary sources to add detail to and complete your outline.

Incorporating Analysis

Your literature review grows directly out of the reading you did in order to come up with your research question(s), hypotheses, and methodology. In your earliest draft of this section, you may start by copying and pasting notes you took on significant sources related to your topic, particularly if you took notes in the form of an annotated bibliography.

If your notes are short summaries or key quotations, you will need to add analysis into your discussion of those sources. Remember, literature reviews are not just a summary but also an analytical review of the literature.

Note: For more information on analyzing information, please see our handout on this topic.
Elements

Introduction
Introduce your “Literature Review” section with an explanation of its organization and the key themes covered. Explain the broad sweep of the literature you will review.

Organization and Structure
The organization of your literature review varies depending on how you have synthesized and evaluated your sources. You are not simply reporting about others’ research; you are analyzing it and demonstrating how it relates to your purpose. Do not simply take the literature at face value; demonstrate your critical thinking by arranging your sources in a way that strengthens your argument.

If the **history** of scholarship is important to your research, organize the articles chronologically.

If major **theoretical battles** define the field, consider organizing this section around each of the competing theories.

If the differences in the studies’ **methods** are important, group your sources by methodology.

If you are **combining two or more fields** of study, give each field at least one sub-section.

*Note:* For more information on patterns of organization, please see our “Organization” handout.

Regardless of the structure you adopt, you will want to guide your readers using **subheadings** and **transitions**.

*Note:* For more information on transitions, please see our handout on this topic.

Conclusion
At the end of the section, summarize the important themes and gaps in the literature and how they relate to your study.

References


