

LITERATURE REVIEWS

WHAT IS A LITERATURE REVIEW?

A Literature Review is a summary *and* a critical analysis of professional literature (books, journal articles, etc.). It focuses on a specific topic of interest and shows the relationship between other material and a writer's own work. A literature review may be a stand-alone paper or it may provide a framework for a longer, original essay.

STEP-BY-STEP:

These guidelines are adapted primarily from Jose Galvan's (2006) *Writing Literature Reviews: A Guide for Students of the Behavioral Sciences*.

Step 1 – Read and analyze the Literature.

- Skim the texts to get an idea of the general purpose and content of each article (focus on the abstract, introduction, first few paragraphs, and the conclusion of each article)
- Make notes for each source (define key terms, look for differences in the way key terms are defined in the various works under review)
- Write down key statistics and key quotations
- Note strengths and weaknesses of each piece
- Identify major trends observed throughout the literature
- Identify gaps in the research and/or conclusions of the literature
- Note the relationships between the methods, evidence, and conclusions of the literature
- Keep notes focused on the selected topics

Step 2 – Summarize the literature in a table.

- Galvan recommends building tables as a key way to help overview, organize, and summarize findings, and suggests that including one or more of the tables created may be helpful in a literature review. If tables are included as part of a review, each must be accompanied by a written analysis that summarizes, interprets and synthesizes the literature charted in the table
- Tables that may be relevant to a review include:
 - Definitions of key terms and concepts
 - Research methods
 - Summary of results

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Step 3 – Synthesize the literature prior to drafting the review.

- Using notes and tables construct an outline of a literature review.
 - Consider purpose and voice
 - Plan how to organize findings into a unique analysis
 - Create a topic outline that traces an argument and its logic
 - Note differences in the literature for each sub topic in an outline
 - Note gaps in the research
 - Describe the relevant theories
 - Plan to discuss how individual studies relate to and advance theory
 - Plan to summarize periodically, and again near the end of the review
 - Plan to present conclusions and implications
 - Plan to suggest specific directions for future research near the end of the review
 - Flesh out your outline with details from the analysis

Step 4 – Draft a literature review essay.

- Near the beginning of a review, state explicitly what will and will not be covered
- Specify the point of view (thesis statement) early in the review
- Communicate the point of view by integrating key details of the article into a clear and cohesive literature review (remember: a literature review is not a series of annotated articles)
- Use subheadings that identify sub-topics, especially in long reviews
- Use transitions to guide readers through the directional changes in an argument
- Write a conclusion for the end of the review:
 - Provide closure so that the path of the argument ends with a conclusion
 - How a review ends, however, will depend on the reason for writing it
 - If the review was written to stand alone, the conclusion needs to make clear how the material in the body of the review has supported the assertion or proposition presented in the introduction
 - On the other hand, if the review is part of a larger work (thesis, dissertation, or journal article) presenting original research usually leads to the research questions that will be addressed