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What are they?

How do we write them?

Why do we bother?

Literature Reviews

What is a literature review?

- Several academic disciplines, including nursing, assign literature reviews.
- However, what if you have never written or even read a literature review?
- Fortunately, this assignment is not as scary as it may sound.

What is literature?

- When we hear “literature,” we may think of *Jane Eyre*, *Moby Dick*, or *A Tale of Two Cities*.
- However, “literature” refers to any written material about a specific topic.

Your literature review should be...

- “...an account of what has been published on a topic by accredited scholars and researchers” (Taylor, n.d.).
- It could be part of a grant or research proposal, an introduction to primary research, or an independent document (University of Wisconsin-Madison, n.d.).

A literature review may do any of the following:

- Summarize (recap key information).
- Synthesize (reorganize that information).
- Re-interpret old material.
- Combine new and old interpretations.
- Trace the intellectual evolution of the field, including major controversies.
- Evaluate the literature, indicating which articles are the most relevant (“Literature Reviews,” n.d.).

What a literature review is *not*

- Do *not* merely provide a list of article summaries in your literature review.

What to ask your professor

- How many sources should you review?
- What kinds of sources (e.g., books, journal articles, websites)?
- Do you need to focus on a common theme or issue?
- Do you need to include background information, such as history and/or definitions (“Literature reviews,” n.d.)?

How old can sources be?

- Your professor will likely ask for current sources if you are studying a field that changes quickly, such as medicine.
- In social sciences, history, or humanities, sources may be older if you're tracing changes of perspective over the years.

Before you start writing, ask yourself these questions:

- What kinds of literature should I look for (e.g., theory, methodology, quantitative research, etc.)?
- What is my scope (e.g., types of publications, academic discipline)?
- Do I have enough information? Is it relevant and focused?
- Have I critically analyzed my sources?
- Have I referred to studies that contradict my point of view?
- Is my literature review relevant, appropriate, and useful to my readers (Taylor, n.d.)?

How do you get started?

- Find several articles related to your topic, even if they don't address your topic exactly.
- Pick out the most important information related to your topic and purpose ("Social work," 2010).
- Critically evaluate your sources. Are they scholarly and credible? What are the authors' credentials? What evidence do the authors use? Is the authors' viewpoint balanced or biased? Are the authors' arguments and conclusions convincing ("Write a Literature Review," n.d.)?
- Point out any controversies or inconsistencies in the articles you're reading ("Social work," 2010).
- Organize your literature review logically. You may begin by outlining the "big picture" of your topic, or immediately focus on one aspect of it.
- Make a clear connection between your sources and your topic.

Structuring a literature review

Like most academic assignments, a literature review includes a:

- Introduction
- Body
- Conclusion

Introduction

- Identify your topic.
- Discuss trends, conflicts, or gaps in the research about your topic.
- Include your purpose for reviewing the literature about this topic (University of Wisconsin-Madison, n.d.).

Body

- Include resources with common elements (e.g., qualitative vs. quantitative approach, chronology, authors' conclusions, specific purpose).
- Summarize resources, giving longer summaries of more important articles.
- Write clear topic sentences, transitions, and explanations as needed (University of Wisconsin-Madison, n.d.).

Conclusion

- Cite key contributions of articles to body of knowledge about your topic.
- Assess the articles you reviewed. Mention any research gaps, flaws in methodology, inconsistencies in findings, and areas that call for continued study.
- Add your own insight into the link between your literature review topic and a larger area of study (University of Wisconsin-Madison, n.d.).

Why do we do them?

Literature reviews offer:

- An overview of the current research on your topic;
- Evidence that the writer has done his/her research;
- An informative background to a longer research paper (“Literature Reviews,” n.d.).

References

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