

# Skills for Learning

# Guide to Writing a Literature Review

## What is a Literature Review?

A literature review is what it says it is, it is a comprehensive review of the literature available for any given research question. It is a summary, analysis and evaluation of the literature and an explanation of what research has already been performed for a research area.

## Why do a Literature Review?

A literature review has several functions. Firstly, it gives you the opportunity to show what research has already been done on any given subject. As part of this overview, you may also be able to highlight areas which relate to the subject in hand but may not have had as much research carried out upon them. This can help with the justification for your research proposal. If a great deal of research into a subject has already been published, you may need to revise your research proposal. If you are planning research, you need to find an area where further research would be useful. A literature review will help you identify such an area.

Your literature review should discuss the theories and concepts that underpin your research. This is different to the methodologies you will actually use in your research, it is a discussion of the area of research, the main issues relating to it. You should also explain any terminology that you will use in your research area and provide definitions of any areas that may not be obvious. As part of your literature review, you need to critically analyse the material you are looking at - this is part of the review process.

## Beginning Your Literature Review

The first step in your literature review is to choose a topic. This could take the form of a research question, an area you wish to investigate further. When you have selected your research area, analyse it, think of search terms associated with it, try and think about synonyms and alternate spellings, anything that will help when searching for current research.

The next step is to formulate a search strategy. Make a note of the words and phrases you are going to search for. Look at the available resources and decide which ones are most appropriate for your needs. Begin searching, keeping a record of the searches you perform. Look at the quantity of results you are getting, is it too much, or too little? Do you need to narrow or broaden your search area? You may need to narrow your search. Think about the boundaries of your research question, think about what could, or should, be excluded. You may also need to rethink your initial research question in light of the amount of data found.

If you are not finding enough information, try considering your research question from a different angle. Or try expanding the area of research to include areas you may have originally excluded as only being peripheral to your research. If you cannot find much literature on your chosen subject, you may also need to consider the practicalities of research on that subject. It may be that little research has been carried out because of ethical or technical difficulties. Whatever your results you will have to assess the material you find to ascertain whether or not it is suitable. For information on this process, see the [Guide to Evaluating Information](#). At this stage of the review process, you should just be identifying material to be included in the final piece of work. You should make notes on articles as you check them, but you should not be writing your full review.

## Writing Your Literature Review

When you have identified your credible, up-to-date, accurate information sources, you need to start building up a picture of your subject area and the research that has been done on it. You will have searched a range of sources, print and electronic, to build a full picture. Start grouping information together into different areas of your research topic. Make notes, identify themes, but you should continually exercise critical analysis on the documents you are using.

The different sub-topics you have identified can then form the basis of your literature review. You should describe your subject, demonstrate your understanding, state what research has been done and how it will impact upon your own research. You should use quotes from other authors as required, but you should not rely on them. Your work should be fully referenced in order to avoid plagiarism, for more information on this, see the [Academic Misconduct guide](#).

Your literature review should begin with an introduction. This is a brief description of your research area. It gives you the opportunity to define your research area, highlighting any areas that you have excluded, and the reasons for doing so. Following the introduction, you will have the main body of your literature review which will form the bulk of your work. You will then present your conclusions; these should not present any new information, but should summarise your findings and, hopefully, justify your choice of research topic.

You will need to include a reference list and/or a bibliography. This is a list of all the sources you have used and/or consulted. Follow [Cite Them Right Harvard](#) style unless otherwise specified.

## Help and Advice

For more details on the help available, please refer to the Skills for Learning website at:  
<http://www.wlv.ac.uk/skills>.

## Further Reading

Books offering advice on writing a literature review are available in the Study Skills collections in the Learning Centres and as part of the electronic book collection. Here are a sample of literature review books that may be useful:

Greetham, B. (2021) *How to write your literature review*. London: Red Globe Press:  
[https://librarysearch.wlv.ac.uk/permalink/44UOWO\\_INST/8bamsd/alma991002997438204901](https://librarysearch.wlv.ac.uk/permalink/44UOWO_INST/8bamsd/alma991002997438204901)

Hempel, S. (2020) *Conducting your literature review*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association:  
[https://librarysearch.wlv.ac.uk/permalink/44UOWO\\_INST/8bamsd/alma991003074983804901](https://librarysearch.wlv.ac.uk/permalink/44UOWO_INST/8bamsd/alma991003074983804901)

Machi, L.A. and McEvoy, B.T. (2022) *The literature review: Six steps to success*. California: Corwin:  
[https://librarysearch.wlv.ac.uk/permalink/44UOWO\\_INST/13ndfb5/alma991003020231604901](https://librarysearch.wlv.ac.uk/permalink/44UOWO_INST/13ndfb5/alma991003020231604901)



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