

Doing a Literature Review

What is a literature review?

A literature review is a written text which presents an organised and evaluative overview of the available information in a particular subject area. According to Judith Bell, its aim is to provide "a picture... of the state of knowledge and of major questions in the subject" (2005: 100).

When might I be asked to write a literature review?

A literature review is usually carried out in preparation for an extended analytical task – typically, for a PhD thesis, but also for shorter reports, essays, and so on, especially in the final year of a degree programme.

Why do a literature review? What's it for?

If it's done well, a literature review will:

- Ensure that you don't repeat someone else's work.
- Provide models for how to conduct your research effectively.
- Provide core information that will help your study.
- Enable you to locate your proposed study in its context(s).
- Enable you to be critical, reflective and evaluative in your approach to the enquiry process.

Critical? Reflective? Evaluative?

A literature review isn't merely descriptive (e.g. 'X believed blah, but Y believes bleurrgh') and it isn't a simple listing exercise (e.g. 'X believed blah. Y believes bleurrgh').

To do its job, a literature review needs to group material together, organise it, make connections, draw distinctions (e.g. 'Although X's claim that blah is the case was influential for many years, it has been treated with increasing scepticism since the late 1990s, when figures such as Y and Z began to argue that bleurrgh might be more likely, or even bleurrgh-blah-bleeeeeeeek').

The aim of a literature review is to show your reader (usually your tutor and/or assessor) that you have read, understood and evaluated the main published work on a particular topic or question. It shouldn't be a simple description of what others have written: it needs to show critical reflection and evaluation in prose, i.e. you don't just say what you've found, but you say why it is important and how it indicates different views on the topic you are researching.

A literature review is pretty much the same as an essay then?

No, a literature review isn't the same as an essay. Unlike an essay, a literature review doesn't set out to provide a supported and developed argument about a particular subject; instead, it provides a critical survey and summary of the available material on the subject. Think of it as laying the foundations for the more argumentative work that follows.

In that case, what's actually in a literature review?

This is likely to vary, but think in terms of the following:

- An overview of the topic or question, including the definition of key ideas
- A categorisation of the works you are reviewing, usually arranged by theme (i.e. different

perspectives on the topic) or type (e.g. books, journal articles)

- An account of the similarities and differences between the works reviewed (e.g. where they present different arguments or contradictory facts)
- An indication of how ideas on a topic might have changed over time
- A conclusion about which works are going to be most useful to you.

What sort of things should a literature review consider?

When you review a piece of work on a topic, think about these kinds of questions:

- Who wrote it? What are their qualifications? Do they support their claims, arguments, ideas, etc., with clear and reliable evidence (e.g. case studies, historical sources)?
- Is it objective? In other words, does the author have a particular bias or 'axe to grind' and, if so, does this make his/her view less trustworthy?
- Is the work persuasive? Are you convinced by its arguments, its data, etc?
- Does it add usefully to your knowledge or is it simply repeating ideas/facts that you already know?

Do I need to do referencing for a literature review?

Yes, of course. This is absolutely essential. Without full and accurate referencing a literature review is practically meaningless.

Material in a literature review must be fully referenced using the Author-Date or Harvard System of referencing. This means that a literature review must also include a full bibliography of sources.

See Skills Guide section on Referencing for further information on the Author-Date/Harvard system.

What about illustrations?

A literature review won't usually include illustrations but it might include diagrams, especially if the subject matter is technical or broadly scientific. This might be more likely in a literature review which is preparing for a report, but there is no hard and fast rule on this. However, a literature review should never feature images simply as decoration or visual 'padding'.

How do I do a literature review? Step-by-step...

1. Establish what the topic is and what you need to find out about it.
2. Find materials relevant to the topic from diverse sources (e.g. books, journal articles, web sources).
3. Evaluate the different materials: which are most significant and useful?
4. Show that you understand the most significant and useful materials through analysis and interpretation.
5. Show that you also understand how the different materials relate to each other, how they agree or disagree, how they form bodies of opinion.
6. Show that you understand why ideas about a topic might not remain the same over time.

Suggested Reading

- Bell, J. (2005) *Doing your Research Project (4th Edition)*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Blaxter, L., Hughes, C., and Tight, M. (2010) *How to Research*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Hunt, A. (2005) *Your Research Project*. London: Routledge.