Literature Review

A literature review, in addition to briefly summarizing the theses and major claims of these scholarly works, evaluates the sources’ strengths and weaknesses, explains the relationships between different authors’ claims, and gives the reader an overview of scholarly debate on the topic.

How to Write a Literature Review

1. Select a Research Topic

If you have been assigned to write a research paper for a class, start by thinking about the coursework you have done so far. What are some of the major theories, debates, or problems in the field you are studying that interest you? Is there any aspect of a topic that has been ignored by researchers? Or, do you have a nuanced take on an old topic? Aim to say something that hasn’t been said before.

2. Search for Scholarly Literature

After pinning down your research topic, the next step is to search for relevant scholarly literature.

Scholarly vs. Popular Literature

Scholarly literature refers to articles in academic journals, books published by university presses, and masters and doctoral theses; these kinds of sources are more often than not peer-reviewed, meaning that other academics evaluate and confirm their credibility before they are published.

Popular literature refers to articles written in magazines and newspapers, books written for general audiences, and websites like blogs and social media platforms. Popular literature sources may be well-written, informative, and even nuanced, but because they are written for a general audience and do not undergo rigorous peer review like scholarly sources, they lack ethos in the academic world.

Where to Find Scholarly Literature

It is best start with The Phillips Library when conducting research; our library houses most of the materials and tools you will need to effectively conduct research at the college level. The best part? Your access to these materials is included in the price of your tuition – available to you at no extra cost!

- Print books and ebooks
- Interlibrary Loan (allow at least 2 weeks for materials to arrive)
  - I-Share: allows you to borrow books, DVDs, microfilm, and other media from any college library in Illinois.
  - WorldCat: allows you to borrow from libraries all over the world.
- Academic journal literature
  - EBSCO databases (over 30)
  - ProQuest databases (5)
- And when in doubt, ask a librarian for assistance!

Other places where you can find sources include

- The bibliographies and references lists of scholarly books and articles – shows you what sources your authors are citing. You can cite these as well!
- Google Scholar: you can also create citations and save them to your Google Account.
- The Reference sections of Wikipedia articles – gold mines of scholarly sources! (example)
Tips
When scanning articles, it is helpful to read the abstracts, which reveal the articles’ theses, methodologies, findings, and recommendations for future research. This will quickly help you determine whether a source is relevant to your research topic, thus saving you time.

The same principle applies to books: start with the Index to look for key terms related to your topic. This will allow you to quickly find what you need without having to read the entire book.

3. Evaluate Your Sources
As you scan each article, you should begin to take notes, identifying the following:

- Theses/Hypotheses
- Research Methods
- Findings/Results
- Implications for Future Research

Keep in mind that you will not merely summarize the articles, but also evaluate them critically. Consider the strengths and weaknesses of each article:

- Is the author reliable? Are the author’s claims based on evidence or are they simply opinionated assertions? What evidence does the author use? What were used to obtain their data?
- Are there any limitations in the author’s research methods (e.g. time restrictions, small participant group, potential biases)? Is the author aware of these limitations, acknowledging margin of error?
- Are there any important aspects of the topic that the author neglects to address? Does the author give reasons for not including these aspects in the article’s scope?

4. Synthesize Your Sources
This is the key part of the literature review: cross-referencing your sources and identifying major trends regarding the research topic. Some key questions to ask as you compare sources include

- What is the overall tenor of the academic discussion on the research topic?
- On what issues do authors tend to disagree? What different conclusions do they draw?
- What aspects of the issue are ignored or only touched upon briefly by existing research? What lingering questions need to be answered?

Be sure to answer these questions in relation to your chosen research topic; this will go a long way toward making your review of the literature relevant your research.

5. Writing the Review
As with any paper, it is helpful to outline your review before writing it. For more information on outlining, please see our “Constructing an Outline” document on the ASC Student Toolkit.

Introduction (1-1.5 pages)
The introduction will give a brief overview of the topic before you get into the specifics of the review. Be sure to emphasize what areas of your topic the review will and will not focus on, as well as the significance of the literature review: how will your literature review guide future researchers in exploring the topic?
Body (7-8 pages)

Consider organizing the body of your literature review by topics, theories, or problem areas rather than going article by article. This way, you set yourself up to compare different authors and papers within sections, making the sources “talk to each other” and showing where there is overlap and disagreement between sources; otherwise, you run the risk of evaluating each source in isolation. Use subheadings to separate different sections.

Conclusion (1-1.5 pages)

Your conclusion should reemphasize the relevance of your sources to the topic at hand: what does the current debate on the topic look like, what questions remain to be answered, and which gaps will your research paper attempt to fill? In other words, what do we know and not know about the topic, and what do you hope to find through your research?

NOTE

Be sure to check with your professor when writing a literature review. Although this document offers a general overview of how to go about writing one, individual instructors can always set different requirements (e.g. formats, page lengths).