

Chapter 2: The Literature Review

A literature review is a section of your thesis or dissertation in which you discuss previous research on your subject. Following your Chapter 1, your literature review begins as you try to answer your larger research question: Who has looked at what, why, and what have they found? It allows you to understand what others have said about your topic, to verify your assumptions, to refine your initial research question, and to identify gaps. For your committee, the literature review also demonstrates that you are knowledgeable about related research and scholarly traditions in your field.

Preparing to Write

The literature review is more than just a list of previous research papers in the field. If you think of writing a thesis or dissertation as writing a story of your research, the literature review then will be a story within a story. In the literature review story, you tell the reader about general trends, traditions, and approaches to your subject, ones that surround and support your study.

Choose texts to help you try to answer your research question. As you explore the literature, take notes:

- Why did you pick up this text? [Reminder: As you pick up a text, note all documentation information.]
- What is being studied, by whom, why? What did they find?
- How does this article, chapter, book, study help you answer your question or not?

After you have read and written, draw a diagram, chart, or matrix that would help you to visualize connections between your sources and reveal a possible structure for your literature review. For example, if you notice distinct historical developments in researching your subject, you may choose to plot it out on a time line. Or, you may decide to organize your literature review by the researchers' stance towards your subject. Or, you may want to create a sort of bubble map to discover:

- What major trends and patterns in the results of previous studies emerge?
- What common threads do you find?
- How do these studies connect?

There is no right or wrong way for structuring the review. It should explain the thinking process behind your choices and help reveal the need to answer your question (to fill a gap) and how to go about doing that (the methodology).

When you have a rough draft completed, ask yourself:

- What previous research has been more significant and less significant?
- What gaps in literature have you noticed? Why do these gaps exist?
- How might your research hypothesis or research questions inform your organization and characterization of the previous literature?

Revising

1. When describing, critiquing, and citing your sources, use the following citation patterns to introduce and comment on sources:

- Generalization (combining 2 or more sources): Describe what makes this group of sources a category
- Summarize each key source; paraphrase the author[s]' argument
- Consider using within-sentence quotations to note key words or phrases
- Use block quotations (more than 40 words) sparingly.

However, avoid ambiguous citations like these two:

1. The causes of illiteracy have been widely investigated (Clement, 1993).
2. Much has recently been published on the relationship between culture and the successful treatment of hypertension (Lee, 1998).

It needs to be clear whether Clement and Lee are major researchers in their fields or what their work includes. Also, one author does not suggest “wide investigation” or “much” research.

2. Help your readers make their way through your literature review by referring to its organization or back to a part of the review, or by providing a definition. For example, use words and phrases, such as

In this section, I will discuss ...

This part will describe ...

For the purpose of this discussion, metadiscourse means ...

The main purpose of this review has been ...

Thus far, this review has outlined ...

3. Things to Remember

- Avoid describing each piece of relevant research in detail, piece by piece.
- Focus on general trends and approaches.
- Only critique the few most relevant, seminal sources. There is no need to critique each source.
- When reviewing a study, avoid reporting an author’s assertions as though they were findings.
- Highlight agreement before disagreement.
- Depending on your field of study, you may want to tell a story that led you to this research and would help explain your choices to include or exclude previous research.

Getting Feedback

1. Get feedback often and from different audiences – your family, friends, professors, colleagues, advisor, other graduate students, and the RWC. The more you talk about your research, the more comfortable you get.
2. Keep a positive attitude. Research is hard. If it were easy, everyone would be doing it.
3. Participate in RWC roundtables and share your ideas and experiences.

Sources: *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein
Academic Writing for Graduate Students and *Telling a Research Story: Writing a Literature Review* by Christine B. Feak and John M Swales