
HOW TO WRITE A LITERATURE REVIEW

COMPILED BY THE NORTHWESTERN WRITING PLACE

This resource is adapted from the Graduate Writing Place's workshop "Tackling a Literature Review & Synthesizing the Work of Others." For more information about our workshops, see [Graduate Writing Workshops](#).

INTRODUCTION

Compiling and synthesizing literature as a justification for one's own research is a key element of most academic work. Nonetheless, both the strategies and components of literature reviews vary based on the genre, length, and prospective audience of a text. This resource gives advice on how to effectively assess, synthesize, summarize, and make connections between a variety of sources.

THE PURPOSES OF A LITERATURE REVIEW

- To critically analyze a segment of a published body of knowledge through summary, classification, and comparison of prior research studies, reviews of literature, and theoretical articles
- To emphasize the credibility of the writer in their field
- To provide a solid background for a research paper's investigation

A GOOD LITERATURE REVIEW SHOULD ...

- Be organized around a thesis statement or research question(s)
- Develop your understanding of the literature in a field(s) of study
- Synthesize results into a narrative summary of what is known and not known on your topic
- Identify areas of controversy
- Formulate questions for future research
- Be current (and historical if necessary)

5 STEPS TO WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW

- 1 Define the Scope
- 2 Search the Literature
- 3 Analyze the Literature
- 4 Synthesize the Literature
- 5 Write the Review

STEP ONE: DEFINE THE SCOPE

Look for relevant models in journals in your field (e.g., a target journal for publication) and papers, qualifying exams, proposals, and dissertations of colleagues. While none of these will necessarily provide you with literature relevant to your topic, they will be good guides for scope in terms of:

1. How many papers they cite
2. Length
3. What type of information they cover

They will also be good guides for establishing the rhetorical moves that are most relevant to your field.

Use these relevant models to determine:

1. What you are studying
2. The perspective you are taking
3. The field(s) that are relevant



STEP TWO: SEARCH THE LITERATURE

Skim to identify relevant:

- Empirical and theoretical literature
- Primary and secondary source
- Classic and foundational studies
- Important authors who are working on your topic

Keep track of the keywords and search terms you use as well as what databases, bibliographies, and card catalogs you searched.



Search:

- Databases
- Books
- Review Essays
- Citation Indices
- Empirical and theoretical literature
- Primary and secondary sources
- Classic and foundational studies
- Important authors who are working on your topic

TIP: Develop a system to organize and manage your material (RefWorks, Zotero, EndNote, good old fashioned index cards, etc.).

STEP THREE: ANALYZE THE LITERATURE

As you read, ask yourself:

- What are the origins and definitions of the topic?
- What are the key theories, concepts, and ideas?
- What are the major debates, arguments, and issues surrounding the topic?
- What are the key questions and problems that have been addressed to date?
- Are there any important issues that have been insufficiently addressed or not addressed at all?



TWO STAGES TO ANALYZING THE LITERATURE

SKIM AND ANALYZE

For theoretical literature, note the:

- Theorist

- Discipline
- Theory
- Key premises

For research-based studies, note the:

- Author
- Date of study
- Publication
- Discipline
- Methodological approach/research design
- theoretical/conceptual framework
- research (sample, site, problem, purpose, question)
- sub-questions
- key findings
- conclusions & recommendations



REPORT AND SUMMARIZE

What are the goals of summaries?

- To understand the historical context and current state of the literature
- To begin to identify themes, trends, patterns
- To begin to look for gaps and anomalies

Write out narrative summaries of the major issues, arguments, and theoretical models that inform each piece of literature.

What types of claims do the authors make? (Fact, worth, policy, concept, interpretation).

Include conclusions that you draw from this work and any inferences you can make regarding your study.

Try not to quote directly from the text while writing these summaries. Only quote to:

- Show that an authority supports your point
- Present a position or argument to critique or comment on
- Include especially moving or historically significant language
- Present a particularly well-stated passage whose meaning would be lost or changed if paraphrased or summarized



STEP FOUR: SYNTHESIZE THE LITERATURE

WHAT KINDS OF EVALUATION CAN I MAKE?

SUMMATIVE

When a literature review is based largely on description of what is known (summative evaluation) the thrust is on defining and establishing the existence of an issue or a problem with suggestions for addressing it.

ANALYTICAL

Where the emphasis is on an investigation or analysis of the literature (analytical evaluation) then your literature review is concentrating on the nature of the problem, its cause and effect as a basis for action to solve it.

FORMATIVE

When a literature review emphasizes explanation of what you believe the knowledge stemming from previous literature means (formative evaluation) it compares and contrasts the various points of view that exist on a problem as a basis for determining which is to be preferred and what might be done to confirm this.



WHAT KIND OF ARGUMENTS CAN I MAKE ABOUT THIS LITERATURE?

1. Argument of Discovery: a synthetic statement of what is known about your research topic
2. Argument of Advocacy: a synthetic statement of what your research/future research aims/should aim to discover

WHAT KIND OF COMMON DENOMINATORS SHOULD I LOOK FOR ACROSS THE LITERATURE?

- Theoretical orientations to the topic
- Qualitative versus quantitative approaches
- Methodology more generally
- Evidence
- Conclusions of authors
- Specific purpose or objective
- Chronology

HOW DO I DEVELOP AN ARGUMENT OF DISCOVERY INTO ARGUMENT OF ADVOCACY?

- Ask, what are the implications of what is known about the research subject?
- Ask, are there gaps, omissions, debates, and questions about the topic that need further study?

STEP FIVE: WRITE THE REVIEW

HOW DO I WRITE THE INTRODUCTION?

1. Define or identify the general topic, issue, or area of concern, thus providing an appropriate context for reviewing the literature
2. Point out overall trends in what has been published about the topic; or conflicts in theory, methodology, evidence and conclusions; or gaps in research and scholarship; or a single problem or new perspective of immediate interest.
3. Establish the writer's reason (point of view) for reviewing the literature; explain the criteria to be used in analyzing and comparing the literature and the organization of the review (sequence); and, when necessary, state why certain literature is not included (scope).



HOW DO I WRITE THE BODY?

What did the different ways of grouping your literature according to common denominators reveal?

Other general principles to keep in mind:

- Summarize individual studies or articles with as much or as little detail as each merits according to its comparative importance in the literature, remembering always that space (length) denotes significance.
- Provide your reader with strong “umbrella” sentences at beginnings of paragraphs, “signposts” throughout, and brief “so what” summary sentences at intermediate points in the review to aid in understanding comparisons and analyses.

HOW DO I WRITE THE CONCLUSION?

1. Summarize the major contributions of significant studies and articles to the body of knowledge under review, maintaining the focus established by the introduction.
2. Evaluate the current “state of the art” for the body of knowledge reviewed, pointing out major methodological flaws or gaps in research, inconsistencies in theory and findings, and areas or issues pertinent to future study
3. Conclude by providing some insight into the relationship between the central topic of the literature review and a larger area of study such as a discipline, a scientific endeavor, or a profession.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS AND TECHNIQUES FOR WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW

VERB TENSE

<i>Technique</i>	<i>Examples and Common Uses</i>
Using past tense emphasizes the researcher's agency.	<p>Examples: Jones (1997) investigated the causes of illiteracy; The causes of illiteracy were investigated by Jones (1997).</p> <p>Common uses: reference to single studies; focus is on what previous researchers did</p>
Using present perfect does not emphasize the researcher as agent.	<p>Examples: The causes of illiteracy have been widely investigated (Jones 1977, Ferrara 2000, Hyon 2004); There have been several investigations into the causes of illiteracy (Jones 1977, Ferrara 2000, Hyon 2004); Several researchers have studied the causes of illiteracy [1-3].</p> <p>Common uses: reference to areas of inquiry; focus is on what previous researchers did</p>
Using present tense does not refer to researcher activity at all.	<p>Examples: The causes of illiteracy are complex (Jones 1977, Ferrara 2000, Hyon 2004); Illiteracy appears to have a complex set of causes [1-3].</p> <p>Common uses: reference to the current state of knowledge; focus on what has been found</p>

In general, moving into the present perfect and then into present tense indicates that the ideas being reported are increasingly close to the writer's in some way: close to the writer's own opinion, or close to the writer's own research, or close to the current state of knowledge.

ESTABLISHING TONE

<i>Technique</i>	<i>Examples and Common Uses</i>
Unreal conditionals	<p>This article would have been more persuasive if the author had related the findings to previous work in the topic.</p> <p>It would have been better if the authors had given their main findings in the form of a table.</p>
Paired adjectives	<p>In this ambitious but flawed study, Jones and Wang...</p> <p>In this flawed but ambitious study, Jones and Wang...</p>
Delivering a measured critique	Although the author suggests that journal articles written in languages other than English

Technique	Examples and Common Uses
	<p>may have limited impact, he fails to see the advantages of more publications being available in English.</p> <p>The author suggests that journal articles written in languages other than English may have limited impact; however, he fails to see the advantages of more publications being available in English.</p> <p>Despite the many interesting citations in support of his view, the citations are dated and are not likely meaningful today.</p>

PARAPHRASING RESEARCH BY OTHERS

- When reading a passage, try first to understand it as a **whole**, rather than pausing to write down specific ideas or phrases as you read.
- **Be selective.** Unless your assignment is to do a strict, “literal” paraphrase, you usually don’t need to paraphrase the entire passage. Instead, summarize only the material that helps you make your own point.
- Think of what “**your own words**” would be if you were telling someone who’s unfamiliar with your subject (your mother, sibling, friend) what the original source said.
- Remember that you can **use direct quotations** of phrases from the original within your paraphrase. When reusing **shared language** (common phrases within the discipline), you don’t need to change the phrasing or use quotation marks.

CLAIMING CENTRALITY FOR YOUR RESEARCH

USE QUASI-NEGATIVE SUBJECTS

- Apart from a chapter in Foster (1997), this series **has been little discussed** by critics or art historians. For example, these pictures were ignored by Johns in her...
- **Little is known**, however, about participants’ views of university-community collaborations.

USE CAUTION WHEN USING “NO” OR “NONE”

- You can use “no” when your conclusion is based on but does not directly refer to the cited literature.
- If you want to refer directly to the previous research, use none of.

OTHER COMMON STRATEGIES

- The research has tended to focus on... [this], rather than on... [that]
- These studies have emphasized... [this], as opposed to... [that]

- Although considerable research has been devoted to... [this], rather less attention has been paid to... [that]

PARTICULARLY USEFUL FOR STEM FIELDS

- However, it remains unclear whether...
- It would thus be of interest to learn how...
- If these results could be confirmed, they would provide strong evidence for...
- These findings suggest that this approach might be less effective when...
- It would seem, therefore, that further investigations are needed in order to...

YOU CAN CLAIM THAT YOU ARE EXTENDING KNOWLEDGE

- These recent developments in computer-aided design clearly have considerable potential. In this paper, we demonstrate...
- The literature shows that Rasch Analysis is a useful technique for validating multiple-choice tests. This paper uses Rasch Analysis to...
- Such active-R networks eliminate the need for any external passive reactance elements. This paper utilizes the active-R approach for the design of the circuit...

IT MAY BE MOST EFFECTIVE TO COMBINE APPROACHES

- **Previous research has not addressed** whether or not people who are employed in some occupations rate the maintenance of overall appearance more important than do people who are employed in other occupations. **Moreover, research has not fully considered** the behavioral consequences of individuals putting more or less emphasis on physical appearance (e.g., does it affect grooming habits or maintenance rituals?). **Nor has it addressed** if they patronize a beauty shop, a barber shop, or a beauty salon.

EVALUATING YOUR LIT REVIEW

STRIKE & POSNER (1983) SUGGEST A GOOD LITERATURE REVIEW HAS THREE CHARACTERISTICS:

1. It **clarifies** and **perhaps resolves** problems within a field of study rather than glossing over those problems
2. It results in a “**progressive problem shift**” that yields a new perspective on the literature with more explanatory and predictive power than is offered by existing perspectives
3. It satisfies the **formal criteria of a good theory** (consistency, parsimony, elegance, and fruitfulness)

HART (1998) SUGGESTS THE READER WILL LOOK FOR EVIDENCE THAT:

- You have a clear understanding of the topic
- You have identified all major studies related to your topic
- You have drawn appropriate conclusions from prior research
- You have established and described the various points of view related to your topic

- You are proposing valid recommendations based on analysis of the information contained in your sources
- You have demonstrated that there is a genuine research issue to be addressed.

REFERENCES AND ADDITIONAL READING

- Chris Hart. [*Doing a Literature Review: Releasing the Research Imagination.*](#)
- Lawrence A. Machi and Brenda T. McEvoy. [*The Literature Review: Six Steps to Success.*](#)
- Kenneth Strike and George Posner. "Types of Synthesis and Their Criteria." In Spencer A. Ward and Linda J. Reed (eds.), *Knowledge Structure and Use: Implications for Synthesis and Interpretation.*
- John M. Swales and Christine B. Feak. [*Academic Writing for Graduate Students, 3rd Edition.*](#)