

Literature Review: the essentials

A literature review is an opportunity to explore the current debates on a particular topic, compare and contrast arguments and findings, identify strengths and weaknesses and present a holistic view of the current literature to your reader.

Finding relevant literature is just the beginning. It is important not to take the literature as being definitive or unquestionable. Rather, understand its limitations and display this in your writing. This is not to say that literature should be criticised in a negative way. Previous authors should be credited for advancing thinking in a particular field. However, it is often possible to criticise literature constructively on the basis that:

- previous findings may not generalise to other situations, e.g. to other groups of employees or to other business sectors;
- the method(s) used to conduct a piece of research may have limitations;
- findings which appeared sound at the time of the study may need re-evaluating in the light of changed circumstances such as economic or working conditions;
- key assumptions underlying a piece of research may be challenged.

Good reviews show the student's use and analysis of relevant literature. It is important to identify and contrast the key issues surrounding your topic, e.g.

Smith (2012) believes that whole class teaching is the most effective approach to ensuring that pupils develop basic mathematical understanding. His views contrast with those of Jones (2015), whose research in a range of primary schools demonstrated greater retention of mathematical concepts in pupils following investigative small group approaches. However, Davies (2013) suggests that classroom grouping is a complex issue, and that teachers need to analyse lesson content and pupil preferred learning styles when considering appropriate methodologies.

A useful way to understand how to evaluate literature on a topic is to read a few reliable articles in leading academic journals. These usually follow a consistent structure:

- introduction, including a summary of theory and previous findings
- limitations of previous work
- unexplored areas and hence the justification for the present study
- the research method(s) used in the study
- a description of results obtained
- a discussion of results, their interpretation in light of previous research, implications
- for the present study, limitations of the study's findings
- conclusions

There is a simple way of looking back over your own material and looking for signs of critical thinking. Look for the indicator words and phrases such as:

because; therefore; firstly; secondly; thirdly; from the above discussion; this appears to be; consequently; for example; in contrast; in conclusion, to summarise; suppose; if.

These words and phrases at the very least suggest that the writer is engaging with material and providing structure and analysis. It is important to keep this analysis objective. When writing, also consider your own values, expectations and perspectives. Do they influence your interpretation of others' work?

Literature reviews, whether as a standalone assignment or as part of a dissertation, require sustained engagement with critical thinking, rather than just describing the themes across the sources used.

Additional guides on this topic are available on the [Skills Hub](#).