

How do I write a literature review?

This guide will explore what a literature review is, how it differs from other assignments and the skills needed to put one together.

What is a literature review?

Essentially it is an independent exploration what has been previously written on a topic or, sometimes, an attempt to answer a question using existing research. Structurally it is very similar to an essay in terms of organising key ideas, comparing and contrasting authors' views, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and offering critical analysis throughout. However, rather than making an argument for a case and answering a particular question as you would in an essay, you are presenting all of the debates and existing knowledge on this topic and condensing them for your reader. It is also a great opportunity to show off your research skills.

Problem: break it down;

Literature search: identify RELEVANT literature;

Evaluate;

Analyse and interpret;

Tie it all together and identify gaps for further research.

If you are writing a literature review as part of a dissertation, consider how your intended research will fill in any gaps in the existing knowledge identified in the literature review, or add to the current field. If you are undertaking primary research, communicate clearly how your approach and findings relate to the literature.

If your dissertation is entirely based on a literature review, you will need to compare and contrast the literature, see whether similar or different results have been identified in different studies, and reach a conclusion about what is known about the topic, and what questions still need to be answered.

What is it not?

A general discussion. Make sure you identify a focus for your writing and research, and stick to it. It is very easy to get distracted without a focus.

[An annotated bibliography](#). Do not list each source and summarise it as you go. Structure your paragraphs around ideas, not authors.

Suggestions for further reading. You should be identifying all of the key arguments on your topic so your reader has a thorough understanding of existing knowledge in your field.

Creating a literature review.

This is a 3-step process: finding the data, reviewing it and then writing up your discussion and analysis of your conclusions.

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1. Finding literature:

The first thing you need to do is plan how you will go about finding the relevant information. Spend 30 minutes thinking about your topic. What do you know already and what keywords can you use to describe the main aspects?

Then think about which information sources will be useful for your review. A good starting point is your lecture notes for ideas and key figures, but you will be expected to go and read the original sources by these key authors, and do look beyond these as well.

Your tutor will want to see that you have used a range of literature including books, journal articles, legislation, newspaper articles, Government sites etc. Identify the best databases to find this information from [NELSON](#). See the guides on the Skills Hub or talk to your [Academic Librarian](#) for more information.

Searching tips:

- Your literature should usually be up to date and always from a reliable source. It could be said that the quality of the work depends on the quality of the research.
- The searching process will be time consuming. Allow up to a third of your total assignment production time for this.
- If you find a useful reference that an author has used, try to track down the original so you can identify the original arguments yourself. Relying on someone else's interpretation is not always a good idea.
- Literature is not always right: question it! Look at the methods used by the authors. How appropriate are they, and are they making any assumptions? What are their limitations? Have they missed anything important? If it is an older piece of work, do the findings still apply in the societies and economies of today?
- Justify your choice of sources: why have you included the sources you have over others? Make it clear how the literature you use is the key research in the field. What are your limitations and parameters? For example, are you investigating adults aged 18 to 50? Or exploring an issue in the UK only? Or looking at events over the last 10 years only? Make this clear.

2. Reviewing the literature:

You will need to read and draw conclusions from the literature in order to answer your title or question.

Read journal articles to see how authors synthesise, bring the arguments together, and how they use language to make their points clear, e.g.

Trust policy requires that these measurements be documented on customised growth charts which take into account the standard maternal influences (Local Trust, 2013), however the accuracy of

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these customised growth charts has been disputed by a Cochrane review (Carberry *et al.* 2014).

Read sources critically and actively, not passively. Can you identify key or recurring themes? Similarities or differences in findings? Gaps in the literature? Areas for future research? Strengths and weaknesses of methodologies used? Question the authors' interpretation of their findings, how do they explain them and are there any alternative explanations? When you are reading, consider your own values and assumptions. How do these affect how you interpret the literature?

Keep a record of your sources:

Format for book:

Author/Editor:

Year of publication:

Title (edition):

Place of publication:

Publisher:

Key words:

Format for a journal article:

Author:

Date of publication:

Title of article:

Journal title:

Volume Number / Issue Number / Page Number:

Key words:

3. Writing up discussion: presenting the discussion and analysis of your conclusions.

Introduction:

- a) What is your topic?
- b) Why have you chosen this topic?
- c) What are the key themes that you are going to discuss?
- d) What are you going to argue?

You may need to identify how you conducted your literature search: state which databases and keywords for each database were used. Not all assignments require this, and some will require a separate methodology for this, please check your guidelines.

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Main body of literature review:

- e) Discuss key themes;
- f) Compare and contrast the literature, does the literature make similar points or are there differences?
- g) Analyse and evaluate the findings from your themes;
- h) Does the literature make theoretically and methodologically sound points?
- i) Remember to adopt a critical perspective.

Conclusions:

- j) Summarise the key findings within the literature;
- k) Summarise the main points you have made;
- m) Restate your argument/draw your final conclusions.

Once you have written the first draft, ask yourself if the purpose of the review is clear. Does your reader know what you are trying to find out? Check to see if you have actually fulfilled what you set out to do at the start.

Also check: Is the literature you have used relevant to your title? Have you demonstrated your breadth of reading by including multiple types of sources? E.g. books, journals, legal information, governmental publications etc.

Points to remember:

It is important to look at your assignment brief. Expected structures vary from course to course, for example subheadings are often required, so check your requirements at the start of the process.

A common stumbling block for students writing literature reviews is that they don't know when to stop researching and start collating information. This can be a cyclical process, but once you have started to write you are likely to identify gaps which you can target with more research. There is no minimum or maximum period or number of documents, as the amount of published information for different topics varies widely. A good rule of thumb is that, once you start seeing the same arguments and authors' names coming up again and again, you have probably exhausted the published research on those themes. In terms of planning your time, divide the whole process roughly into three. A third of the time on your research, a third on writing up and a third on proofreading and redrafting.

Further reading:

Booth, A. (2012) *Systematic approaches to a successful literature review*. London: Sage.

Oliver, P. (2012) *Succeeding with your literature review: a handbook for students*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Open University Press.

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Please note: All Learning Development study guides are written using the Northampton Guide to Harvard Referencing. There are other referencing systems, such as footnotes, Running Notes, APA and OSCOLA used in different subjects; please refer to the guides for this information.

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