



A Brief Guide to: LITERATURE REVIEWS



Do not use this handout as a replacement for your assignment description. Use it as a supplement to help understand the basic expectations of your assigned genre, but *always* defer to the specific assignment description given

IMPORTANT DISCLAIMER to you by your instructor.

What is a literature review?

DEFINITION: A literature review is a paper or section of a paper that gathers sources on a subject and puts them in dialogue. In it, students demonstrate their grasp of the current discourse on their research topic.

PURPOSE: Literature reviews help students survey research in their field, acquaint them with other scholars' work, find breaks in the research that provide opportunities to develop their own ideas, and learn how to articulate their own methods and frameworks. In other words, they provide the backdrop for a student's own research. They may also direct other scholars to consider research via a new line of inquiry.

What are the necessary components of a literature review?

- **Introduction:** Start with an overview of the literature review's main topics. Articulate a clear goal and research question that will serve as a through line for the rest of the paper.
- **Summary and synthesis:** Explain the arguments of each source and facilitate dialogue between them. Think of this as a narrative, explaining where there are connections, disagreements, or major movements or schools of thought, as well as where the discourse may be headed.
- **Analysis:** Again, your research question drives the literature review. Taken together, what do these sources tell you? Why does it matter? This is the space to interpret the significance of arguments or research in relation to the field as a whole and to include your own voice as a conversation partner in those arguments.
- **Evaluation:** Discuss sources with an eye toward themes or gaps in the research. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the leading arguments on your subject? Which arguments or developments warrant particular emphasis? Where will your research be building and is there anything it will be refuting?
- **Conclusion:** Briefly restate the sources' main points, reminding readers of their significance and connections to your question. Use any gaps or flaws uncovered as a launchpad for further research.

What are some practical tips for completing a successful literature review?

- Good scholars follow the research trails of other good scholars. Use the footnotes and bibliographies of key books and articles to find other sources that may contribute to your research.
- Make sure to use the most recent information available to demonstrate that you are up to date on the discourse. This will help you prove that your argument will be cutting edge.
- Students may feel tempted to seek out and summarize large swaths of research (e.g., a history of the study of a subject or a full report on all angles of a debate). The goal of a literature review is not to detail others' discoveries or arguments at length but to explain how certain developments inform your own inquiries.
- Literature reviews set students up to later demonstrate how their own research contributes to the field's discourse. Therefore, pay close attention to what other scholars might be missing.
- Literature reviews also provide a key for the reader to understand the student's own work. Write your literature review in such a way that it will contextualize or undergird your later argument or research.
- Finally, remember that you are a conversation partner making explicit connections between scholarly works. When you cite multiple sources in the same paragraph, you are probably synthesizing other scholars' research. Good job!

Where can I find more information about literature reviews?

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