

Introduction to literature review assignments

Tape script

When you think of the word, literature, you might think of poetry or works of fiction. However, at university, literature also means the work of published academics. In fact, The Macquarie Dictionary defines it as *the writings dealing with a particular subject*.

One common academic genre or writing style is the literature review.

A literature review can be an important part of a longer academic text such as a thesis or an article published in a peer-reviewed journal. If you are a research student, you will find information on this type of review in the Research Writing section in the Study Skills pages. *Shorter* literature reviews are a common assignment for undergraduate or postgraduate coursework students. This video will introduce you to literature reviews *as an assignment* and suggest ways you can organise your review.

So, what is a literature review? In brief, a literature review is an account of the work that has been published by the experts in a particular field. In other words, it is an overview of our current knowledge of that field. Academics 'converse' with each other by publishing their work and responding to the publications of other researchers. Literature reviews are part of this academic conversation and help to build our knowledge of a discipline.

Let's consider how to get started. Before you begin work on your literature review, ensure you read your lecturer's instructions very carefully because literature reviews as assignments can vary. When you read your instructions, make sure you pay attention to questions, like:

- Will you choose your own research topic, or do you have a question that you must answer?
- Do you have a suggested number of texts that you must include?
- What type of resources must you include? Should they all be peer reviewed journals, or can you refer to "grey" literature like government reports?
- Do you have a recommended structure to follow?

Next, why would your lecturer ask you to write a literature review?

For undergraduates and students doing postgraduate coursework, the literature review gives you the opportunity to demonstrate:

- your depth of knowledge of a topic or an issue
- your understanding of scholarly writing, debates and competing arguments
- your skills in evaluating the literature and the research
- awareness of different research methodologies.

Many students are unsure about the difference between literature reviews and essays. Think about it this way:

- **An essay examines a topic. You use the literature as evidence to support your ideas about the topic.**
- **A literature review examines *the literature* of a topic. In fact, we can say that the literature *is* the topic.**

In short, a literature review of a particular topic:

- summarises, analyses, and evaluates the relevant literature of that topic
- reveals our *current knowledge* of the topic

and

- reveals *gaps* in our knowledge of the topic.

A literature review is **not** a list of summaries, nor is it an argumentative essay.

How is a literature review structured? As we've seen, a literature review is not an essay. However, it *is* structured like an essay. Your literature review will have an introduction, body and conclusion. The introductions and conclusions follow standard organisation. If you need to refresh your memory about how to write introductions and conclusions, visit the essays page on this website.

Let's focus on the body of your review. As you are doing your research and reading the texts you find, ask yourself questions like...

- How are these different research articles linked?
- Do they agree or disagree with each other?
- How could I group or categorise the literature?
- What patterns are emerging?

As you reflect on the answers to questions like this, you should begin to develop a plan for the body of your literature review.

Common plans include **General to specific** organisation.

We start with literature that looks at the broader field to set the context and then narrow down to literature that is relevant to your specific topic. So, for example, imagine you are a health student researching mentoring for occupational therapists, you may begin by looking at the literature about mentoring generally. Then you may look at mentoring for allied health professionals and then you may look specifically at how occupational therapists benefit from mentoring.

Another common plan is **chronological**.

In this plan, we organise the literature by time, or history. We start with early research on our topic and move towards the most recent research.

A third organisational plan is **thematic**

When we do this, we group the content into common themes. For example, if you are writing a literature review about project management, themes could be

- performance
- project complexity
- project issues
- management styles, and so on.

A fourth common method is to use **methodology** to organise your body.

In this case, you may compare the results that emerge from studies that used different research methods. For instance, if you are an education student exploring teaching strategies, you may look at studies that used

- classroom observations
- surveys with teachers or students
- focus group interviews
- quantitative analysis of exam results, and so on.

This video has given an overview of literature reviews as an assignment and how you could organise your review. Work through the following materials to learn more about the writing process and build the language you need to conduct and write an effective literature review.

And don't forget to speak to a Language and Learning Advisor if you need more help.