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Literature Review

The purpose of a literature review is to collect relevant, timely research on your chosen topic, and synthesize it into a cohesive summary of existing knowledge in the field. This then prepares you for making your own argument on that topic, or for conducting your own original research.

Depending on your field of study, literature reviews can take different forms. Some disciplines require that you synthesize your sources topically, organizing your paragraphs according to how your different sources discuss similar topics. Other disciplines require that you discuss each source in individual paragraphs, covering various aspects in that single article, chapter, or book.

Within your review of a given source, you can cover many different aspects, including (if a research study) the purpose, scope, methods, results, any discussion points, limitations, and implications for future research. Make sure you know which model your professor expects you to follow when writing your own literature reviews.

Tip: Literature reviews may or may not be a graded component of your class or major assignment, but even if it is not, it is a good idea to draft one so that you know the current conversations taking place on your chosen topic. It can better prepare you to write your own, unique argument.

Benefits of Literature Reviews

- Literature reviews allow you to gain familiarity with the current knowledge in your chosen field, as well as the boundaries and limitations of that field.
- Literature reviews also help you to gain an understanding of the theory(ies) driving the field, allowing you to place your research question into context.

- Literature reviews provide an opportunity for you to see and even evaluate successful and unsuccessful assessment and research methods in your field.
- Literature reviews prevent you from duplicating the same information as others writing in your field, allowing you to find your own, unique approach to your topic.
- Literature reviews give you familiarity with the knowledge in your field, giving you the chance to analyze the significance of your additional research.

Choosing Your Sources

When selecting your sources to compile your literature review, make sure you follow these guidelines to ensure you are working with the strongest, most appropriate sources possible.

Topically Relevant

Find sources within the scope of your topic

Appropriately Aged

Find sources that are not too old for your assignment

Credible

Find sources whose authors have authority on your topic

Appropriately “Published”

Find sources that meet your instructor’s guidelines (academic, professional, print, etc.)

Tip: Treat your professors and librarians as experts you can turn to for advice on how to locate sources. They are a valuable asset to you, so take advantage of them!

Organizing Your Literature Review

SYNTHESIZING TOPICALLY

Some assignments require discussing your sources together, in paragraphs organized according to shared topics between them.

For example, in a literature review covering current conversations on Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, authors may discuss various topics including:

- her graphic style
- her allusions to various literary texts
- her story’s implications regarding LGBT experiences in 20th century America.

In this case, you would cluster your sources on these three topics. One paragraph would cover how the sources you collected dealt with Bechdel’s graphic style. Another, her

allusions. A third, her implications.

Each of these paragraphs would discuss how the sources you found treated these topics in connection to one another. Basically, you compare and contrast how your sources discuss similar issues and points.

To determine these shared topics, examine aspects including:

- Thesis
- Definition of terms
- Common ground
- Issues that divide
- Rhetorical context

SUMMARIZING INDIVIDUALLY

Depending on the assignment, your professor may prefer that you discuss each source in your literature review individually (in their own, separate paragraphs or sections). Your professor may give you specific guidelines as far as what to cover in these paragraphs/sections.

If, for instance, your sources are all primary research studies, here are some aspects to consider covering:

- Purpose
- Scope
- Participants
- Methods
- Results
- Discussion
- Limitations
- Implications
- Significance

Each section of your literature review, in this case, will identify all of these elements for each individual article.

You may or may not need to separate your information into multiple paragraphs for each source. If you do, using proper headings in the appropriate citation style (APA, MLA, etc.) will help keep you organized.

If you are writing a literature review as part of a larger assignment, you generally do not need an introduction and/or conclusion, because it is embedded within the context of your larger paper.

If, however, your literature review is a standalone assignment, it is a good idea to include some sort of introduction and conclusion to provide your reader with context regarding your topic, purpose, and any relevant implications or further questions. Make sure you know what your professor is expecting for your literature review's content.

Typically, a literature review concludes with a full bibliography of your included sources. Make sure you use the style guide required by your professor for this assignment.