

# Literature Review: Basic

A literature review is one of the first tasks when undertaking research and will be one of the final tasks to be completed (new information may appear over the course of your own research). It needs to be done in a comprehensive and organised manner to see what research has already been completed, where the gaps are and where your research will fit.

## Remember

The finer details of a literature review will be subject-specific. Always check the requirements of your discipline, and confirm the details with your lecturer or supervisor.

## What it does

- Identifies gaps in the literature
- Avoids reinventing the wheel - it will save time and may prevent you from making the same mistakes as others
- Identifies other researchers working in the same field - a good source of networking
- Increases your breadth of knowledge in your subject area
- Identifies seminal works in your subject area
- Provides the intellectual context for your own work, enabling you to position your project relative to other work done in the area
- Continues where others have left off, giving you a basis upon which to build current knowledge
- Identifies opposing views
- Puts your work into perspective
- Demonstrates that you understand and can apply previous work in the area
- Identifies information, ideas and methods that may be relevant to your research.

## Useful tips

- Perform preliminary searches of the literature and continue them to stay up-to-date in your field
- Always save your searches so that you can repeat them in the future
- Stay up-to-date on new publications in your discipline by setting up alerts
- Use your search results to identify when to narrow or broaden your focus and search terms
- Identify and place other important researchers in your field
- Evaluate the work of authors who have cited the work of important publications and researchers in your research area
- As you read, look out for useful phrases to introduce, compare, expand on and provide an overview of the various sections of your own review.
- When discussing the literature, you can group it in several ways, for example:
  - Chronologically
  - Difference of approach
  - From closely related studies to distant studies

## The Language

The language you use when writing a literature review is important. It helps your reader to understand where you stand on the particular topic or subject area. The purpose of academic writing in this context is to lead your reader to the conclusions or views you want them to reach. Your language needs to clearly show your position on a topic, which will in turn strengthen your academic voice.

## Explain yourself

Use clear descriptions to explain what you are doing. For example, your introduction may state:

- “The aim of this literature review / chapter is to define ...”
- “This chapter reviews some of the literature on ...”

Choose language that helps guide your reader through the literature and the connections between the ideas, concepts and findings. Depending on your particular task, you can use language that leads the reader through a broad view of the literature, using words such as:

- “Within the literature, there are numerous ...”
- “In the literature is found broad support for ...”

## Cite others

To prevent your literature review from reading like a shopping list, vary the way you report data. That is, try to avoid a single pattern of writing, such as “Smith claims that... / Harrison claims that...” etc. Reporting on the work of others can be done in several ways, each of which places importance (prominence) on different elements. For example:

- *Information* prominent: “The theory of ... is confirmed in Albon’s study... (Albon, 2012)”
- *Author* prominent: “Barrett (1998) describes ...”
- *Weak author* prominent: “Many authors have adopted the same approach (Davies, 2009; Jamison, 2010; Xing, 2016)”.

## Tenses

When writing about others’ research, getting the tense right helps to demonstrate your understanding. Be sure to use:

- past tense for completed work, and
- present tense for work that is considered to still be ‘current’, even if it has been published in the past.

## On confidence

You can develop a ‘confident’ voice in your academic writing through the conscious choice of words. Be confident in the claims you make in terms of the argument you are advancing (i.e., don’t ‘sit on the fence’). This can be done whilst being cautious about the results of experiments which are always time-dependent and can be overturned if more evidence is obtained (‘Data suggests that ...’ ‘Evidence appears to indicate that ...’).

Reporting verbs can either indicate your views on the veracity of the work (right, wrong, indefinite), or the author’s views about the content of the literature (positive or negative). Your use of reporting verbs can help you to achieve a confident tone in your argument, one that is objective and fair, convincing and decisive. Examples of reporting verbs are *demonstrates*, *informs*, *argues*, etc.

## Other helpsheets available

- Literature Review: Structure
- Writing in an Academic Style
- Paraphrasing
- University Speak
- Incorporating Evidence into your Writing