

# Literature Review: Detailed

The aim of writing a literature review is to understand the context of your own research by surveying and evaluating what has already been written on a given topic. This can enable you to clarify your own focus and methodology, and to show how you are contributing to a debate.

Evaluating each publication can also clarify what has been proven in your field of study. A literature review also **defines the gap in a particular area** and outlines the areas that require further research.

Structurally, a literature review is similar to an essay. Both **organise key ideas, compare and contrast authors' views, identify strengths and weaknesses, and offer critical analysis** throughout. But, rather than making an argument for a case and answering a particular question as you would in an essay, a literature review presents all of the debates and existing knowledge on this topic and condenses them for the reader. This review then forms part of a larger document, an essay, thesis or report, which goes on to make an argument and contribution to research. Depending on your discipline, literature reviews can also be organised using report structure. This helpsheet uses an essay structure.

## What it does

- Identifies gaps in the literature
- Saves 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
- Continues where others have left off, giving you a basis upon which to build 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.

## Number of references

This depends on what the literature review is for, and what stage you are at in your studies. Your lecturer, tutor or supervisor should specify a minimum number of references in your assessment material. Generally, a reasonable number of references in a literature review would be:

- Undergraduate review: 5 to 20 titles depending on level of study
- Honours dissertation: 20+ titles
- Masters thesis: 40+ titles
- Doctoral thesis: 50+ titles

## Sources

“Literature” refers to the previous works or sources of information relevant to your research area, both theoretical (ideas-based) or empirical (collected or observed data). This material may include:

### Primary sources

- First-hand reports of research found in academic journal articles, books of collected articles or conference papers
- Other original materials, such as historical documents, company reports, or diaries
- Works of art or literature.

### Secondary sources

- Critical evaluations of original studies (primary sources)

### Tertiary sources

- Information and ideas often put together from secondary sources, e.g. text books that provide a broad overview of the topic

## Preparation

- Perform preliminary searches of the literature and continue them to keep up to date in your field (surveying the latest issues and digests of journals in your field)
- Save your searches so that you can run them again in the future
- Set alerts on publications in your discipline so you are notified when new work is published
- Narrow or broaden your focus and search terms depending on your search results
- Identify and place important researchers in your field
- Evaluate the work of authors who have cited the work of important publications and researchers
- Keep abreast of conferences in the field and conference proceedings.

## Structure

The review has an **introduction**, **body** and **conclusion**, well-formed paragraphs, and a logical structure. Whereas the main aim in a literature review for an undergraduate assignment is to summarise and compare/contrast the literature, the aim of a literature review for a higher degree thesis is to elucidate a research gap (what others have done; what needs to be done). The examples below reflect the level of sophistication needed for an **undergraduate** assignment.

### Introduction

An introduction should provide your reader with answers to the following questions:

- What is your topic?
- Why is it important to investigate this topic?
- What are the key themes that you are going to discuss?

Note: To identify how you conducted your literature search, state which databases and keywords you used. Not all literature review assignments require this - please check your assessment guidelines.

### Example

**Topic sentence – identifies five major themes as the scope of this review**

Many theories have been proposed to explain what motivates human behaviour. **Although the literature covers a wide variety of such theories, this review will focus on five major themes which emerge repeatedly throughout the literature reviewed.** These themes are: incorporation of the **self-concept** into traditional theories of motivation, the influence of **rewards** on motivation, the increasing importance of **internal forces** of motivation, **autonomy and self-control** as sources of motivation, and **narcissism** as an essential component of motivation. **Although the literature presents these themes in a variety of contexts, this paper will primarily focus on their application to self-motivation.**

**5 major themes to be covered**

**Concluding sentence – specific focus**

Source: The University of New England (n.d.). *Writing a literature review*. Retrieved from [https://www.une.edu.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/9245/literature-review.pdf](https://www.une.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/9245/literature-review.pdf)

## Body

The role of the body of a literature review is to break down your topic into themes based on what has emerged from the literature.

A paragraph should include:

- a main statement / idea that you are putting forward, e.g. topic sentence related to a specific theme
- a discussion that compares and contrasts the literature (do the various studies or papers make similar points or are there differences?); the discussion should identify any gaps
- analysis and evaluation of the research literature/themes where appropriate
- summing up and linking to the next idea in the next paragraph.

### Example

Topic sentence/Main idea

Supporting literature

Comparing supporting literature: authors are part of the sentence

Burnout in university students has not yet received as much attention as burnout in employees and athletes, but there is increasing recognition that burnout is a problem affecting many college and university students. **In particular**, student burnout has been acknowledged as a function of workload (Schaufeli et al., 2002). **Specifically**, research on burnout in university and college students by Jacobs and Dodd (2003) has highlighted that although students are not formally employed by the university, their studies encompass structured and often coercive activities (e.g. attending class and submitting assignments) that can be considered 'work'. **This notion is supported by** Noushad (2008), whose research indicates that students' workload usually includes balancing study commitments and paid work, which often result in greater stress and exhaustion. **However**, most studies investigating burnout among university students confirm that this is a significant problem associated other factors, such as poor academic performance (Schaufeli et al., 2002), low self-efficacy (Yang & Farn, 2005), negative perceptions of the learning environment and available support (Salmela-Aro et al., 2008; Yang & Farn, 2005), concern over mistakes and doubts about action (Zhang et al., 2007) and low coping effectiveness (Gan, Shang, & Zhang, 2007). **But**, it would seem that so far no studies have been conducted that examine the relationship between the potential for burnout and ameliorating factors that relate to passion for studying and different aspects of academic engagement.

Link to next idea/paragraph

Contrasting ideas from other studies

Example adapted from: Stoeber, J., Childs, J.H., Hayward, J.A., & Feast, A. R. (2011). Passion and motivation for studying: predicting academic engagement and burnout in university students. *Educational Psychology*, 31(4), 513-528.

## Conclusion

As with any essay, the job of the conclusion is to:

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

### Example

Recap original purpose for literature review

The purpose of this literature review was to examine the debate highlighted in the literature around the acceptance of cochlear implants by members of the Deaf community. It can be observed that the majority of the research focused on various perspectives including culture, education, social inclusion and identity, eugenics and cultural genocide. People's relationship with technology was also identified as a key issue that impacted on the level of acceptance of implants within the community. **Despite the extensive literature on this topic, more research and studies are required to gain a better understanding of why those who undergo cochlear implants continue to face the confusion and struggle with assimilation into the Deaf and Hearing communities. Additional research will assist with promoting greater education and understanding around issues of segregation and the importance of culture among deaf people.**

Offer suggestions for further research

Outline main ideas from the body

## Tense

When writing about others' work, use the **past tense** for completed work, and **present tense** for work that is considered still 'current' (even if it has been published in the past).

If you find it difficult to paraphrase or summarise an author's words, helpsheets are available, or you can also drop in to the Writing Space on your campus to get help with this.

## Grouping the literature

When discussing literature, you can group the literature in the following ways:

### 1. Difference of approach

"While McFadden (1987) argues .... (etc.), Solloway (1990) claims that...(etc.)."

### 2. From closely related studies to distant studies

"Green (1991) and Axley (2001) both revealed that... (etc.). However, Hume (2000) demonstrates that... (etc)."

### 3. Chronologically

"Early marketing theory owes its development to...  
Many studies contributed to... for example, Crabbe and Smith (1997)...  
Hunt (1998) was recognised for ... but later Jamison (2000) showed that..."

## Reporting verbs

Reporting verbs can be effective in academic writing: verbs such as demonstrates, informs, argues, etc. Your choice of reporting verb can either indicate your views on the veracity of the work (right, wrong, indefinite) or the author's views regarding the content of the literature (positive or negative).

Also, vary the way you report data so that your literature review is more interesting to the reader, and does not read like a shopping list. For example, avoid using the same words such as "Smith claims that...Harrison claims that..." etc. Another way to vary your reporting is to make different elements prominent in your sentences, such as:

- **Information** prominent: "The theory of ... is confirmed in Brown's study... (Brown, 2012)"
- **Weak author** prominent: "It is relevant to consider work by a number of scholars (Beagle, 2002; Harrison, 2000; Jones, 2012) as..."
- **Author** prominent: "Jackson (1999) describes..."

### References

Fink, A. (2010). Conducting research literature reviews: From the Internet to paper (3rd ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE.

Galvan, J.L. (2004). Writing literature reviews: A guide for students of the social and behavioural sciences. Glendale, CA: Pyczak Publishing.

Thomas, R. M. & Brubaker, D.L. (2008). Theses and dissertations: A guide to planning, research, and writing. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Some information is adapted from "Writing the literature review/Using the literature" published by RMIT University's Study & Learning Centre.

## Other helpsheets available

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