



Literature Reviews

Think of a literature review as a summary of a dinner party where you are the host. At your party, you've invited all of the key scholars in your subject to talk about your research topic. At the party's start, you pose a question to your invitees like, "Why does Shakespeare use bird imagery in his play *Macbeth*?" For the next two hours, each scholar in turn gives their opinion, cites their proof from the text, argues or agrees with concurrent scholarship, and adds to the research and opinions of those who've come before them. You listen silently and do not contribute. Then, after they leave, you take all they said and synthesize their main points as they relate to your paper. That is a literature review: key points – by key figures – that attempt to help you answer your research question.

WHY WRITE A LITERATURE REVIEW?

A literature review establishes a framework for your paper by telling your reader what has already been published on your topic. It positions what you are going to say in your paper within the existing body of literature. It also builds your credibility because it shows that you've done your research.

Literature reviews are especially common in the sciences and social sciences. In fact, there is usually a whole section dedicated to the literature review in experiment and lab reports.

WHAT DOES A LITERATURE REVIEW LOOK LIKE?

A literature review combines both summary and synthesis. It connects and groups sources based on common themes.

It only includes the most pertinent sources for your particular paper, and it does not report new, original findings (your own research). It might trace the intellectual progression of the field, including major debates. The narrower the topic, the easier the literature review will be to write.

For instance, if your topic is Shakespeare, then there would be thousands of articles published on that topic, and it would be impossible to synthesize that much information. However, if your topic is, say, the presence of bird imagery in *Macbeth*, there may only be 25 articles written on the subject and only eight that say something useful for your particular paper. Select only the most important articles – the eight that relate meaningfully to your own research question – and mention them in your literature review.

HOW DO I ORGANIZE MY SOURCES?

A literature review usually has three basic parts:

1. The introduction (where you give a quick idea of the topic's central theme). This isn't a traditional thesis, but it should give the reader a sense of direction through the literature.

French doctors are increasingly looking to alternative medicine for the treatment of chronic lower back pain.

2. The body (where you discuss the sources either chronologically or thematically).
3. The conclusion (where you briefly discuss what you've drawn from the literature and where research might proceed).

WHAT ELSE SHOULD I KNOW?

- In the sciences, the most recent studies are more important than older studies.
- You should use quotes and paraphrase sparingly; summary is key.
- Literature reviews are not annotated bibliographies; paragraphs should not be dedicated to one author or source. You should mention multiple sources in one paragraph using signal phrases. "A lack of consensus exists in regard to" and "There are two distinct schools of thought when it comes to" indicate disagreement. A phrase like "It seems most scholars agree that" signals agreement.
- Literature reviews can vary greatly in length, from one paragraph to many pages.
- You should follow your field's citation style guidelines when summarizing your sources.