

## How to Write a Literature Review

Literature reviews are a crucial piece of the academic research project, though many writers may find themselves wondering why. To some, these lit reviews may seem like busywork or like a request for a book report, but a successful literature review is much more than that.

Literature reviews provide, among other things, an opportunity for writers to articulate what drew them to a project in the first place. More importantly, lit reviews present an overview of previous work on your topic, thus setting a benchmark for your project. In addition, lit reviews allow you to explore, justify, question, and critique the research methodologies, assumptions, findings, and overall conclusions you encountered during research. This in-depth analysis of your sources is what differentiates a literature review (which is essentially evaluative, making qualified judgments about the relative worth of each source) from a book report (which is essentially informative, merely describing the content of a text without reflecting on its merit).

### **The Writing Process for a Literature Review**

To an outside reader in your field, a thorough literature review demonstrates that you are familiar with both historical and current research on your topic and that you have considered a range of methodological approaches to your project. In other words, the lit review establishes your credibility as someone who has prepared carefully before embarking on independent research.

- ❖ **Your first step in undertaking a literature review is to gather literature on your subject.** Typically, more recent publications on your topic will have the most heft. For instance, an essay from 1997 about the influence of the Internet on political discourse might be less useful than one from 2019. Once you have carefully read each source consider writing a brief summary using the questions on the following page. Remember: These summaries will probably not get incorporated into your final literature review. Their purpose is to help you clarify and remember what each text is arguing and how.
- ❖ **Your next step is to cull through those summaries and select only those books and articles that are relevant to your current research project.** As Ming Tham of Newcastle University explains, "You may have read dozens upon dozens of papers, but there will be some that do not contribute to the points that you are trying to make, or there will be papers that give identical information. Because of the time you spent trying to understand them, you may be tempted incorporate all that you have read. Attempting to do this will make what is already a difficult task impossible."
- ❖ **Once you have selected the sources you plan to include, you need to make some organizational decisions.** Typically, organizing your literature review according to themes, methodologies, stances in relation to the topic, and/or underlying concepts is more effective than presenting each source chronologically, alphabetically, or otherwise individually.
- ❖ **Finally, a successful literature review will not consist simply of a string of linked quotes or paraphrases.** Over-reliance on direct quotation suggests "book report" rather than "analytical review." Your goal is to synthesize your summary of a source's ideas with your own opinions and comments on that source material.

### **Five Questions for Writing Preliminary Summaries**

1. What seems to be the author's main purpose? To offer advice, make practical suggestions, solve a specific problem? To critique? To establish “the truth”?
2. What kind of work is it, and who is its intended audience?
3. What is the principal point, conclusion, thesis, contention, or question?
4. What patterns or categories does the work use to divide up the subject matter being discussed?
5. What is new, different, or controversial about this work in relation to other writings that came before it?

### **Four Questions to Help You Connect Each Source to Your Research Topic**

1. Does the article reveal a gap in your field's understanding of this topic?
2. Will your research extend or support the conclusions that the author reaches, or will your research dispute those conclusions?
3. Does the article model a methodology that you hope to emulate or one that you hope to challenge?
4. Is your proposed audience similar to or different from the author's intended audience?

*Adapted in part from writings by Lois Reed and Ming Tham*