

WHAT IS A LITERATURE REVIEW?

A **literature review** (often referred to as simply a **lit review**) is a specific genre of essay that carefully considers the published materials (i.e., *literature*) about a given topic and holds them in conversation with one another. Depending on the scope of the project/ assignment, a literature review may focus on foundational work in the field, or it may center more on recent research and developments on your topic.

Where it differs from a regular research paper or essay is in its *purpose*—in a research paper or supported argument essay, you may use sources to back up the argument that you are making, but the lit review is a piece of writing focused on summarizing and synthesizing the important extant work in the area about which you plan to write. The lit review is often a stepping stone in the process of writing longer research-based compositions (longer final essays, theses, dissertations, articles, book chapters, etc.). Sometimes the lit review becomes a section in your larger work, like in articles and chapters; other times you may be asked to provide a lit review by itself. The literature review is a tool for you as a writer to consider what important things have been said about your topic before, and to begin to consider multiple sources in dialogue with one another; however, the lit review is also a way to demonstrate to both professors and other experts in the field that you have conducted meaningful, thorough research on your topic and carefully considered the similarities and differences in the published material on the matter. If you want to enter the academic conversation about a particular topic, you need to know what has already been said—and what hasn't yet been explored!

STRATEGIES FOR APPROACHING THE LITERATURE REVIEW

SOURCES: The *scope* of your larger research project will determine how many sources you will need to consult and if your lit review should focus on foundational work in the field, recent scholarship on the topic, or a blend of the two. You should also consider *when* the sources you consider were published; for example, a history lit review will probably include older sources than, say, a lit review about recent developments in cancer treatment. Typically, the lit review will focus on scholarly, peer-reviewed sources as well. **If you are unsure, clarify with your professor.**

ORGANIZATION: Unlike an annotated bibliography, the lit review does not just approach your literature/ research from an alphabetical perspective. There are a few different tactics for organizing the sources you evaluate into a coherent essay, but the best approach will depend on your particular topic or research question. Some approaches to consider include:

- organizing by chronology—whether this is based on the content within the source or on the publication date (i.e., a recently published history of the 16th century *might* come before an older work about the 17th century, depending on your research questions)
- by emergent themes—have perspectives on the matter remained the same or have they changed?
- by similarities/ differences—does the body of research arrive at the same conclusions, or different ones?
- by methodologies—how are the sources gathering, coding, or evaluating their research?

Consider what works best for your topic by reflecting on which approach might best answer your research question.

FORMAT: The literature review typically follows standard style conventions for your field, which may be APA, MLA, Chicago, or others. It is usually formatted much like a formal essay with an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. It may not have a specific thesis statement like an argumentative essay would, but the **introduction** should indicate your research question and orient your reader to how you chose the research you discuss in the body. The **body** is where you summarize, synthesize, and compare/ contrast the research you have done—as mentioned above, there should be an overarching organizing principle at work that is suited to your topic. The **conclusion**

then might point toward the main emerging idea(s), or it might identify where the gaps in research have been and how those might be addressed.

You might use both quotes and paraphrase in your lit review (be sure to properly cite each in the appropriate style though!). This is particularly true for key terms and ideas, which you may need to reproduce verbatim within a quote. However, your lit review should focus on summary and synthesis of your sources rather than including multiple long or block quotes. You may also want to include critical evaluation and analysis of your sources—but check the assignment sheet or ask your professor, as some instructors prefer your evaluative perspective be reserved for the larger research project. Be sure you use rhetorical signposts such as “however,” “by contrast,” “moreover,” “similarly,” etc. as you synthesize information from different sources as a cue to the reader where the ideas in your research converge or diverge.

Your literature review needs to include a properly formatted works cited or bibliography page that conforms to the style of your discipline.

SOME DOs & DON'Ts:

DO:

- Be sure the introduction conveys what research questions are addressed by the sources you are about to explore!
- Use topic sentences and transition sentences so that your lit review flows well for the reader.
- Reference the important evidence used in your sources to illustrate your understanding of the research.
- Make sure the ideas you include are clearly attributable to their source, both in your text and through your citations—you want it to be obvious where the information came from!
- Use formal academic English and standard conventions of spelling and grammar.
- Include a bibliography that conforms to the style used in your discipline.
- Leave yourself time for revision; proofread carefully!

DON'T:

- Don't leave out an important source; if most or all of your sources reference the same study, it's likely that study should be included in your review.
- Don't forget that the lit review should hold these sources in “conversation” with one another—make sure you draw clear connections to or divergences between the different sources.