

# How to Write a Literature Review

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## 1. Introduction

Not to be confused with a book review, a **literature review** surveys scholarly articles, books and other sources (e.g. dissertations, conference proceedings) relevant to a particular issue, area of research, or theory, providing a description, summary, and critical evaluation of each work. The purpose is to offer an overview of significant literature published on a topic.

## 2. Components

Similar to primary research, development of the literature review requires four stages:

- Problem formulation—which topic or field is being examined and what are its component issues?
- Literature search—finding materials relevant to the subject being explored
- Data evaluation—determining which literature makes a significant contribution to the understanding of the topic
- Analysis and interpretation—discussing the findings and conclusions of pertinent literature

Literature reviews should comprise the following elements:

- An overview of the subject, issue or theory under consideration, along with the objectives of the literature review
- Division of works under review into categories (e.g. those in support of a particular position, those against, and those offering alternative theses entirely)
- Explanation of how each work is similar to and how it varies from the others
- Conclusions as to which pieces are best considered in their argument, are most convincing of their opinions, and make the greatest contribution to the understanding and development of their area of research

In assessing each piece, consideration should be given to:

- Provenance—What are the author's credentials? Are the author's arguments supported by evidence (e.g. primary historical material, case studies, narratives, statistics, and recent scientific findings)?
- Objectivity—Is the author's perspective even-handed or prejudicial? Is contrary data considered or is certain pertinent information ignored to prove the author's point?
- Persuasiveness—Which of the author's theses are most/least convincing?
- Value—Are the author's arguments and conclusions convincing? Does the work ultimately contribute in any significant way to an understanding of the subject?

## 3. Definition and Use/Purpose

A literature review may constitute an essential chapter of a thesis or dissertation, or may be a self-contained review of writings on a subject. In either case, its purpose is to:

- Place each work in the context of its contribution to the understanding of the subject under review

- Describe the relationship of each work to the others under consideration
- Identify new ways to interpret, and shed light on any gaps in, previous research
- Resolve conflicts amongst seemingly contradictory previous studies
- Identify areas of prior scholarship to prevent duplication of effort
- Point the way forward for further research
- Place one's original work (in the case of theses or dissertations) in the context of existing literature

The literature review itself, however, does not present new *primary* scholarship.

(Information extracted from <http://library.ucsc.edu/ref/howto/literaturereview.html> and used with permission from Kenneth Lyons.)



### **Additional Resources on Literature Reviews**

- A brief, but informative, article on literature review writing that is worth reading is available in the database **ProQuest Nursing and Allied Health Source**.

Parsons, L.C., & Harris, M.S. (2002). Relevance, writing style, and synthesis: Key elements in a focused review of the literature. *Orthopaedic Nursing, 21*, 65.

- Another useful article is available only in the Mount Aloysius College Library or from your instructor. Although it was written for researchers in the radiologic sciences, the overview and tips it provides on literature review writing are helpful for students in all disciplines.

Aaron, L. (2008). Writing a literature review article. *Radiologic Technology, 80*, 185-186.

### **Examples of Literature Reviews**

Search the **ProQuest Research Library** (Advanced Search, using the dropdown menus) for:

- History (Subject) **and** literature review (Citation and abstract) **and NOT** book review (Document type)

McCracken, Grant. "The History of Consumption: A Literature Review and Consumer Guide " *Journal of Consumer Policy* 10.2 (1987): 139. *Research Library*. ProQuest. Mount Aloysius College Library, Cresson, PA. 3 Mar. 2009. <<http://libdb.mtaloy.edu:2056/>>

- Hispanic Americans (Subject) **and** literature review (Citation and abstract) **and NOT** book review (Document type)

Vega, William A. . "Hispanic Families in the 1980s: A Decade of Research." *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. 52.4 (1990): 1015. *Research Library*. ProQuest. Mount Aloysius College Library, Cresson, PA. 3 Mar. 2009 <<http://libdb.mtaloy.edu:2056/>>

These citations are in MLA format.

Search the **ProQuest Nursing and Allied Health Source** for:

- Case management **and** literature review

Delgado-Passler, P., & McCaffrey, R. (2006). The influences of postdischarge management by nurse practitioners on hospital readmission for heart failure. *Journal of the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners, 18*, 154-160. Retrieved June 3, 2009, from ProQuest Nursing & Allied Health Source database. (Document ID: 1216014801).

- Fever **and** children **and** literature (Note: link provided to full-text in **Consumer Health Complete** database)

Walsh, A., & Edwards, H. (2006). Management of childhood fever by parents: Literature review. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 54*, 217-227. Retrieved June 3, 2009, from Consumer Health Complete database. (AN: 20238325)

These citations are in APA format.