

The structure of a literature review

A literature review should be structured like any other essay: it should have an introduction, a middle or main body, and a conclusion.

Introduction

The introduction should:

- define your topic and provide an appropriate context for reviewing the literature;
- establish your reasons – i.e. point of view – for reviewing the literature;
- explain the organisation – i.e. sequence – of the review;
- state the scope of the review – i.e. what is included and what isn't included. For example, if you were reviewing the literature on obesity in children you might say something like: There are a large number of studies of obesity trends in the general population. However, since the focus of this research is on obesity in children, these will not be reviewed in detail and will only be referred to as appropriate.

Main body

The middle or main body should:

- organise the literature according to common themes;
- provide insight into the relation between your chosen topic and the wider subject area e.g. between obesity in children and obesity in general;
- move from a general, wider view of the literature being reviewed to the specific focus of your research.

Conclusion

The conclusion should:

- summarise the important aspects of the existing body of literature;
- evaluate the current state of the literature reviewed;
- identify significant flaws or gaps in existing knowledge;
- outline areas for future study;
- link your research to existing knowledge

Key points to remember

Here are some things to bear in mind when researching and writing your literature review.

- It is not a descriptive list.
- It is not a book by book and article by article summary.
- It is not a survey of every single thing that's ever been written about your topic.
- It must be defined by a guiding concept i.e. essay question, research project or objective.
- It must tell the reader what knowledge and ideas have been established and agreed in your area and outline their strengths and weaknesses.