

Chronological and Thematic Literature Reviews

The Chronological Literature Review:

In a literature review organized chronologically, you group and discuss your sources in order of their publication date, highlighting the changes in research in the field and your specific topic over time. This structure is useful for reviews focusing on research methodology, historiographical papers, and other writing in which you want to emphasize how ideas have developed over time. For example, a literature review on theories of Alzheimer's disease might examine the literature by first providing the earliest medical developments of treatment and progressing to the latest models and treatments. This type of organization is related to what is referred to as a descriptive review in which you sequence the review according to how your topic has been organized by others. However, a frequent criticism of either the chronological or descriptive review is that you have relied on someone else's organizing principles rather than your own synthesis of the material.

The Thematic Literature Review:

In a review organized thematically, you group and discuss your sources in terms of the themes, theoretical concepts, and topics that either you decide are important to understanding your topic or that you have identified from reviewing the key studies on your topic. This structure is sometimes considered stronger than the chronological organization because you define the theories, constructs, categories, or themes that are important to your research. If you have used one of the synthesis matrices described in the previous blog, you will be in a good position to organize your review thematically. In these types of reviews, you explain why certain information is treated together, and your headings define your unique organization of the topic. The sequence of the concepts or themes should be from broad to specific.