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Academic Skills Centre

Writing a Literature Review

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What is a literature review?

A literature review is a description of the literature relevant to a particular field or topic. This is often written as part of a postgraduate thesis proposal, or at the commencement of a thesis. A critical literature review is a critical assessment of the relevant literature. It is unlikely that you will be able to write a truly critical assessment of the literature until you have a good grasp of the subject, usually at some point near the end of your thesis.

How does a literature review differ from other assignments?

The review, like other forms of expository writing, has an introduction, body and conclusion, well-formed paragraphs, and a logical structure. However, in other kinds of expository writing, you use relevant literature to support the discussion of your thesis; in a literature review, the literature itself is the subject of discussion.

What counts as 'literature'?

'Literature' covers everything relevant that is written on a topic: books, journal articles, newspaper articles, historical records, government reports, theses and dissertations, etc. The important word is 'relevant'. Check with your supervisor or tutor when in doubt.

Why do a literature review?

A literature review gives an overview of the field of inquiry: what has already been said on the topic, who the key writers are, what the prevailing theories and hypotheses are, what questions are being asked, and what methodologies and methods are appropriate and useful.

A critical literature review shows how prevailing ideas fit into your own thesis, and how your thesis agrees or differs from them.

How many references to look for?

This depends on what the literature review is for, and what stage you are at in your studies. Your supervisor or tutor should specify a minimum number of references.

Generally speaking, a reasonable number of references in a literature review would be:

- undergraduate review: 5-20 titles depending on level.
- Honours dissertation: 20+ titles.
- Masters thesis: 40+ titles
- Doctoral thesis: 50+ titles.

How to write a literature review

1. The literature search

Find out what has been written on your subject. Use as many bibliographical sources as you can to find relevant titles. The following are likely sources:

- Bibliographies and references in key textbooks and recent journal articles. Your supervisor or tutor should tell you which are the key texts and relevant journals.
- Abstracting databases, such as PsycINFO, Medline, etc.
- Citation databases, such as Web of Science, Scopus.

Many abstracting journals and electronic databases are available through the University Library's [Research Gateway](#).

A useful reference book for information searches:

Lane, Nancy D 1996. *Techniques for Student Research: A Practical Guide*. Second edition. Melbourne: Longman (UC library call number Z 711.2 L36).

Using the specialist librarians

The University Library has three specialist librarians, one for each Faculty. They can help you decide which databases and bibliographies are relevant to your field, and can advise you on other sources for your literature search. Use them!

2. Noting the bibliographical details

Write down the full bibliographical details of each book or article as soon as you find a reference to it. This will save you an enormous amount of time later on.

3. Finding the literature

Once you have what looks like a list of relevant texts, you have to find them.

- Use the UC library catalogue to see if the books and journals are held at UC.
- For ejournals, look at the A-Z listing.
- For books and journals, you can use the UC library pages to search other Canberra library

catalogues (including the National Library).

- For journals, use the LibrariesAustralia, <http://librariesaustralia.nla.gov.au/> catalogue to see which libraries in Australia (including government department libraries and other specialist libraries) hold the journals you are looking for.

If the book or journal you want is not held in Canberra, you may be able to access it through inter-library loans. Check with your supervisor to see if this facility is available to you. (Someone has to pay for inter-library loans!)

The full text of many journal articles can be found on electronic databases such as Business Source Complete, IEEE Xplore, ScienceDirect.

4. Reading the literature

Before you begin to read a book or article, make sure you written down the full details (see note bibliographical 2 above).

Take notes as you read the literature. You are reading to find out how each piece of writing approaches the subject of your research, what it has to say about it, and (especially for research students) how it relates to your own thesis:

- Is it a general textbook or does it deal with a specific issue(s)?
- Is it an empirical report, a theoretical study, a sociological or political account, a historical overview, etc? All or some of these?
- Does it follow a particular school of thought?
- What is its theoretical basis?
- What definitions does it use?
- What is its general methodological approach? What methods are used?
- What kinds of data does it use to back up its argument?
- What conclusions does it come to?

Other questions may be relevant. It depends on the purpose of the review.

Usually, you won't have to read the whole text from first to last page. Learn to use [efficient scanning and skimming reading techniques](#).

5. Writing the review

Having gathered the relevant details about the literature, you now need to write the review. The kind of review you write, and the amount of detail, will depend on the level of your studies.

Important note: *do not confuse a literature review with an annotated bibliography.*

An *annotated bibliography* deals with each text in turn, describing and evaluating the text, using one paragraph for each text.

In contrast, a *literature review* synthesises many texts in one paragraph. Each paragraph (or section if it is a long thesis) of the literature review should classify and evaluate the themes of the texts that are relevant to your thesis; each paragraph or section of your review should deal with a different aspect of the literature.

Like all academic writing, a literature review must have an introduction, body, and conclusion.

The introduction should include:

- the nature of the topic under discussion (the topic of your thesis)
- the parameters of the topic (what does it include and exclude)?
- the basis for your selection of the literature

The conclusion should include:

- A summary of major agreements and disagreements in the literature
- A summary of general conclusions that are being drawn.
- A summary of where your thesis sits in the literature (Remember! Your thesis could become one of the future texts on the subject—how will later research students describe your thesis in their literature reviews?)

The body paragraphs could include relevant paragraphs on:

- historical background, including classic texts;
- current mainstream versus alternative theoretical or ideological viewpoints, including differing theoretical assumptions, differing political outlooks, and other conflicts;
- possible approaches to the subject (empirical, philosophical, historical, postmodernist, etc);
- definitions in use;
- current research studies;
- current discoveries about the topic;
- principal questions that are being asked;
- general conclusions that are being drawn;
- methodologies and methods in use;

... and so on.