



Writing a Literature Review

A literature review explores major themes on a narrow topic by surveying scholarly journals. It summarizes trends or findings, points out controversies, shows different sides of an argument or different ways experts view the topic, and makes links between related materials. It may also point out where research is weak or lacking on a specific topic. A literature review allows its reader to get a quick overview of the topic. It may be an introductory part of a larger research project, or one step along the way to writing a more comprehensive analytical paper.

Deciding on a Topic

Begin with an open mind. You may have to change your topic based on what you are able to find. You may find a topic that interests you more than your original one after you have done a bit of reading. You may have to narrow your topic or widen your scope, depending on how much information is available. Finding your topic thus might not be your first step. It will more likely be your second step, after an initial foray into the library.

Organizing your Research

You will need many journal articles to write an adequate literature review, and you will most likely collect many more articles than you can use. To keep your research manageable, you need to read and take notes as you go. Write notes directly on the front or margins of each article, write them on a sticky note you can put right on the first page of the article, or number your articles and keep notes in a separate notebook or file. Take notes that do these three things: 1) summarize, 2) assess, and 3) reflect.

Summarize – write three or four sentences simply identifying what the article is about. If you are unable to condense your summary to these few sentences, this is a good indication that you don't adequately understand it, and you should read it again.

Assess—decide whether this is a useful, reliable source. Is it objective, controversial? Is it taking a side? Is it well-documented, and from a peer-reviewed journal? Does it represent an eccentric point of view, or a mainstream one? (If it's not objective and not mainstream, you can still use it. But you want to identify these things about it.) What are the author's strengths and weaknesses?

Edgewood College Writing Center

DeRicci 206 · <http://edgenet.edgewood.edu/lss/writingcenter>



Literature continued

Reflect—note how this article shapes your argument. Decide where it fits in with other articles you've collected.

Focusing and Refining your Research

At this stage, you need to decide whether you need all the research you've gathered, or whether you need more. If your topic centers on a controversial topic, you want to make sure your research presents all sides. Your source materials may refer back to an earlier key piece of research. Make sure you have that. Looking through the end notes of the articles is a good way to find more material related to your topic. You may find you have too much material, if a lot of it is similar. Decide what you might get rid of, and look to fill any gaps.

Writing the Draft

It may be very hard to sit down and write with a big pile of research at your elbow. The best way to do it is to just start, reminding yourself that you'll have time to change things later. Let the draft be messy and imperfect. Your main job now is to find through-lines that connect the different issues raised in your research.

Refining the Draft

The style of a literature review is generally concise. You want to convey information quickly, with a minimum of fuss. The style does not call attention to itself, but is rather workmanlike. Paragraphs may begin with a topic sentence, clearly alerting the reader to what will be discussed. Transitional words and phrases are also very important. Tell the reader exactly how x relates to y . Transitional words and phrases are things like: "Likewise..." "On the other hand..." "Moreover..." "In a similar fashion..." "Even more important is..." These let the reader know what is coming.

The Introduction

The introduction may be very plain and bald. This will define the topic under discussion, point out major trends, summarize conflicting viewpoints, and may explain the order in which arguments will be discussed. Rather than a catchy or engaging beginning, the introduction to a literature can just tell the reader what the paper will discuss and how it will do it.

The Body

The body of the paper puts together all your research in a logical manner. You may quote from individual articles or simply paraphrase. Give more details of more important articles. Others may get a mere mention. Always show how the pieces of research relate.

Edgewood College Writing Center

DeRicci 206 · <http://edgenet.edgewood.edu/lss/writingcenter>



Literature continued

Conclusion

The conclusion of your literature review will summarize your findings. This is also the place to evaluate your topic overall. Perhaps much more research needs to be done. So here you may actually be commenting on what hasn't been written, as well as on what you've read. You may find the approaches of some of the authors flawed, or that one side of an issue is dominant, though a less-researched perspective is also valid. This is the place to make those kinds of judgments. If your literature review is only part of a bigger project, the conclusion is the place where you can make the transition to the rest of it. Or if the literature review is one step, and you will later write a more analytical paper, you might end with what problem or issue the literature review has let you recognize. This can be the most analytical part of the literature review, where your own critical perspective is clearly voiced.

Edgewood College Writing Center

DeRicci 206 · <http://edgenet.edgewood.edu/lss/writingcenter>