

The Literature Review

Writing Resource Center, CSU Bakersfield

What is a literature review?

A literature review presents an overview of a particular topic for which a large body of research and scholarship already exists.

What is the purpose of literature review?

The purpose of a literature review is to critically assess the existing body of a research in a particular area through summary, comparison, and evaluation of the published research studies.

Which disciplines use literature reviews?

Literature reviews are used in various academic disciplines. They are often used in the social sciences for classes such as Psychology and Sociology, in the sciences such as Biology and Nursing, in the humanities for classes like Literature and History, and in Business and Public Administration classes.

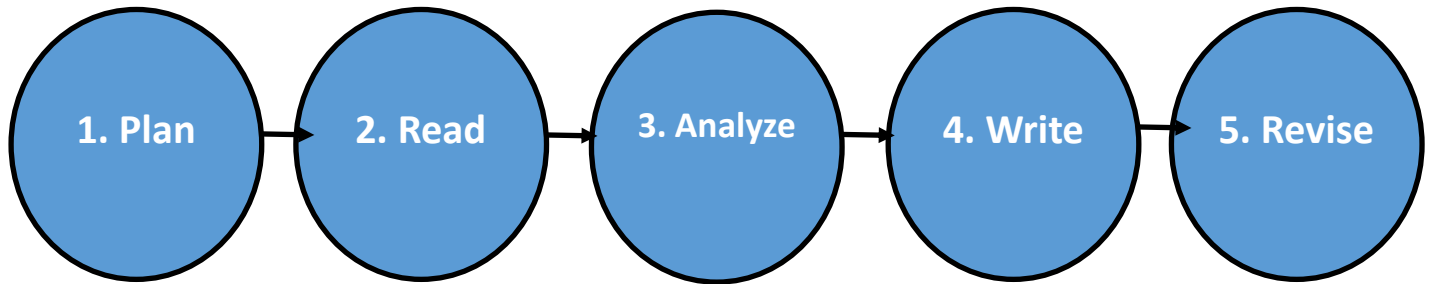
What should a literature review look like?

The format of a literature review will vary according to the discipline and assignment for which it is written. The literature review can be a standalone assignment, a section of a research paper, or a chapter in a thesis or dissertation.

How long does my literature review need to be?

A literature review will vary in length according to the discipline and assignment. If it is a standalone assignment, it may be a few pages in length. If it is a section of a research paper, the length may vary from a few paragraphs to a page or two. If it is a chapter of a thesis or dissertation, the literature review will consist of several pages. Always refer to your assignment prompt or consult with your instructor.

How do I write a literature review?



The Research Process

1.	Begin your research by using the library databases to locate peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles, books, and other sources to discuss in your literature review.
2.	Save ALL sources that you find. Save electronic sources to a folder on your computer, flash drive, or cloud, and photocopy pages from books, magazines, or other print sources.
3.	The most important thing to do as you gather sources is to annotate. Highlight, underline, write in the margins, take notes, or flag pages with Post-Its. This will not only help you to keep track of sources' main points but also help you to see patterns, find common themes, and identify gaps in the research.
4.	Throughout your research, you may find that several of your sources refer to a particular scholar, work, or study. This repetition usually indicates that the scholar, work, or study is a classic source in this field, and therefore, you should try to locate the source as it could be a fundamental piece of your literature review.
5.	If at one point in your research, you get stuck, one of the best things you can do is to consult the Works Cited/References/Bibliography sections of the most helpful sources that you have found. These sections will list a multitude of sources that may be worth consulting. Other useful sections to check for sources are the footnotes and endnotes of a work.
6.	If you are unsure of how many sources you need to gather before writing your literature review, read until you feel that you have a thorough understanding of the topic you are reviewing.
7.	Once you feel that you are ready to begin writing your literature review, organize your sources and your notes to help guide you as you write.

Literature Review Format

- Introduction
 - ◇ Provide an overview of the topic, theme, or issue.
 - ◇ Identify your specific area of focus.
 - ◇ Describe your methodology and rationale. How did you decide which sources to include and which to exclude? **Why?** How is your review organized?
 - ◇ Briefly discuss the overall trends in the published scholarship in this area.
 - ◇ Establish *your* reason for writing the review.
- Body
 - ◇ Find the best organizational method for your review (see boxes below).
 - ◇ Summarize sources by providing the most relevant information.
 - ◇ Respectfully and objectively **critique** and **evaluate** the studies.
 - ◇ Use direct quotations sparingly and only if appropriate.
- Conclusion
 - ◇ Summarize the major findings of the sources that you reviewed, remembering to keep the focus on your topic.
 - ◇ Evaluate the current state of scholarship in this area (ex. flaws or gaps in the research, inconsistencies in findings)
 - ◇ Identify any areas for further research.
 - ◇ Conclude by making a connection between your topic and some larger area of study such as the discipline.

Organization

Chronological	Sources can be discussed either in the chronological order in which they were published or according to trends in the scholarship found within particular time eras. This method is useful for highlighting changes in the research within a field to demonstrate how ideas have developed over time.
Thematic	Sources are grouped and discussed according to the similar themes, concepts, and topics that have been identified while researching. This organizational method is often considered to be the stronger of the two because it requires the researcher to analyze and then synthesize various sources into a well-organized, coherent review.

Tips

Don't	Do
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't simply summarize all of the information that you find. • Don't use too many direct quotations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find a balance between summary <u>and</u> analysis of your sources to present an <i>argument</i>. • Paraphrase as much possible, and always use proper citations.

Examples of Literature Reviews

Example 1

In Gretel Ehrlich's essay, "About Men," she is more interested in describing a particular type of man—a cowboy—than men in general. Contrary to social stereotypes of a "macho, trigger-happy man," she describes cowboys as sensitive and humorous, and gives examples to back up her assertions. Her own appreciation for this often misunderstood type of life-style leads her to argue that these men are "androgynous at the core" (204): men who are rugged, powerful, and courageous—as well as sensitive, generous, and ultimately vulnerable.

Dave Barry, on the other hand, is much less romantic in his approach to describing men. In his essay "Guys vs. Men," Barry humorously categorizes the majority of the male gender as "guys" or "men." Although most of the essay is spent describing what it means to be a guy, he does briefly define men as those who take their manhood seriously, which results in "stupid, behavioral patterns that can produce unfortunate results such as violent crime, war, spitting, and ice hockey" (361). He defines "guys" as being much more laid back, interested in technology simply because it is technology (or "neat stuff" as he calls it), enjoying pointless challenges, having difficulty maintaining a rigid moral code and communicating intimate feelings. He seems to assume that this kind of "guy-ness" is pretty widespread in American society.

Where Barry treats the concept of masculinity humorously, Paul Theroux's treatment of masculinity is serious, with wide-reaching implications. For him, the American version of manhood involves a lack of feeling and critical thinking, requiring men to be stupid, aggressive, and misogynistic. It is, he writes "essentially right-wing, puritanical, cowardly, neurotic, and fueled largely by a fear of women" (539).

This is a poor example of a literature review because the sources are simply organized by author, and the review provides summary rather than analysis.

Example 2

In the wake of the various feminist movements of the twentieth century in America, we have become increasingly aware of what it means to be a woman, and the ways in which societal expectations shape the expression of femininity. What such discussions often leave out—or at least gloss over—is a corresponding critical examination of what societal expectations are for men, and what the implications of these expectations may be. A brief comparison of three vastly different essays—Gretel Ehrlich's "About Men," Dave Barry's "Guys vs. Men," and Paul Theroux's "Being a Man"—offers us a useful framework for thinking about the social construction of masculinity, particularly in terms of its limitations.

Underlying all three essays is a sense of masculinity as prescriptive—and limiting. All three acknowledge, at least tacitly, that society often valorizes masculinity as aggressive, unfeeling, and powerful. Although Barry glosses over manhood on his way to defining "guys," he acknowledges that masculine behavior "can produce unfortunate results such as violent crime, war, spitting, and ice hockey" (361). Ehrlich acknowledges the negative limits of manhood by taking pains to establish the androgyny (primarily through proofs of emotional sensitivity and vulnerability) of what is typically considered one of the most "manly" occupations—the cowboy. Theroux, of the three authors, is the most explicit about the negative limits of masculinity, and the ways that expectations about masculine behavior damage our society—both by the resulting misogyny and by the limits masculinity puts on cultural and emotional expression of men.

This is a successful example of a literature review because the review presents an organized, cohesive argument, and the sources are analyzed rather than summarized.

These examples are from Penn State's Graduate Writing Center's "Strategies For Writing Literature Reviews."