
Literature Review

The Literature Review: Common Questions

1. **What is a literature review?**
 2. **Is it always a separate section?**
 3. **How long should it be?**
 4. **How should it be organized?**
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Purposes of a Literature Review

1. **Demonstrate knowledge and summarize your field of research**
 2. **Show how your project is linked to prior research**
 3. **Establish credibility in your competence and build readers' trust**
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Publications to Review

- **Articles in peer-reviewed journals**
 - **Books with reports of original research**
 - **Government documents, including:**
 - Research reports
 - Policy reports
 - Working papers
 - Internal documents
 - **Papers presented at academic conferences**
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Publications to Avoid

- **Commercial websites**
- **Newspapers**
- **Publications designed for the general public**

Articles in such publications are often incomplete, inaccurate, or one-sided.

Reading the Literature

Step 1: Determine Relevance

- **Title:**
Is it specific (not overly technical)?
 - **Abstract:**
What was the purpose? Methods?
Findings?
 - **Introduction and conclusion:**
Is the purpose close to yours?
Are research questions answered?
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Step 2: Assess Quality and Credibility

- Statement of problem, purpose, questions: Clear?
- Literature review: Gap? Theoretical basis? Current?
- Methodology: Concepts defined? Indicators?
Data collection method? Replicable?
- Data analysis: Method? Match purpose?
Logical flaws?
- Results: Placed in context of previous research?
Modify, replicate, challenge previous research?
Limitations reported?
- References: Complete?

Reading the Literature

Step 3: Read Critically

- Evaluate different sides of an argument
 - Examine the evidence
 - Separate fact from opinion
 - Question textual authority!
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Organizing a Literature Review

1. Research Background Studies

- Goal:

 - Impose order on the field according to criteria relevant to *your* purpose

- Possible ways to order the summaries:

- By research approach (economic theory)
 - By context (country, age group)
 - By findings or argument
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2. Relevant Studies

- Studies that include one or more variables relevant to your research
 - Goal: Justify expected outcome; choice of variables, measures, method, model
 - Include sufficient detail:
 - Problem studied
 - Methodology (if appropriate)
 - Key findings or major argument
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3. Most Relevant Studies

- One or two studies that include *all* variables relevant to your research.
 - Goal:
Critique rather than simply summarize
 - What is known
 - What is missing
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Exercise: Analyze a Literature Review

Read the literature review on pp. 118-119.

Discuss in a small group:

- What is the topic of the study?
 - What is its purpose?
 - How does the author group the studies he reviews?
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