

Writing a literature review summary

Introduction

The literature review can be a chapter of your thesis or a section in a journal article where you identify the theories and previous research which have influenced your choice of research topic and the methodology you are going to adopt.

Purpose

A literature review will

- Provide a historical context for your research
- Provide an overview of current debates, issues and questions in the field
- Discuss relevant theories and concepts which underpin your research
- Introduce relevant terminology and definitions that relate to your research
- Explain how your research extends or challenges related research, or addresses a gap in the field
- Justifies the value and significance of your research

Planning for a literature review

Writing a literature can be divided into 5 steps:

Step 1 – select a topic

Step 2 – search the literature

Step 3 – select and categorise the sources

Step 4 – critique the literature

Step 5 – write the review

It can be challenging to manage large amounts of volume, so when you take notes you need some system to documenting key information such as identifying the main themes, making connections between sources and developing your critical evaluation. Creating some kind of table or matrix can help. Your aim is not simply to record basic details like the author/year/methods, but also include your developing your critique by comprehending, analysing, interpreting and evaluating.

Structuring a literature review

A literature review in a journal article typically contains the following steps:

- Step 1 – introduce the problem and the broader context
- Step 2 – set the specific context, including the focus, location and methods etc
- Step 3 – analyse past research
- Step 4 – identify gaps in the research
- Step 5 – introduce your research aims and question

A literature review in your thesis is a chapter of the overall thesis. As such, it will generally have an introduction, body and conclusion.

- Introduction – context, scope, significance, aims, outline
- Body – organised chronologically, thematically, conceptually, geographically or a combination
- Conclusion – summary, link to your research, reiterating the gap, linking to the next chapter

Writing a literature review

A typical literature review has common language features:

- They are descriptive
- They are interpretative
- They respond with critique
- They demonstrate the writer's voice

Language tip 1

Use evaluative language choices to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of previous studies. For example

useful/appropriate/relevant/valid/limited/limitation/inconsistent/drawback/central

Language tip 2

Use signposting words to highlight your comparison of different sources. For example

Nevertheless/however/in addition/similarly/in particular/whereas/in the same way

Language tip 3

Use reporting verbs to signal your position. For example

Acknowledge/suggest/ignore/demonstrate

Language tip 4

Use different citation types. For example

Research prominent/researcher prominent or weak researcher prominent

Language tip 5

Use logical paragraph structure. For example

Topic sentence/supporting sentences/discussion

Language tip 6

Use hedgers and boosters. For example

Clearly/evidently/importantly/possibly/appears/seems/to some extent/may mean/suggest