



# OWLS Writing Guides: LITERATURE REVIEW

**Definition:** A literature review offers a critical overview of previously published studies on a topic. These studies may include scholarly articles, books, dissertations, conference papers, and reports. It is NOT a literary review, such as a book or article review. Nor is it an annotated bibliography or a summary or descriptive list of published works without critical analysis of the works and the relationships among them.

**Purpose:** The review may be a stand-alone review of the important scholarship on a topic, or it may constitute part of a larger research project, such as a dissertation or proposed research study. In either case, the review generally does some or all of the following:

- Explore each study's contribution to the understanding of the topic
- Describe the relationship of each study to the others under review
- Identify new ways to interpret previous research
- Resolve conflicts among seemingly contradictory studies
- Point the way forward for further research
- Place one's original work in the context of existing literature

The literature review itself does not present new primary scholarship.

**Process:** Development of the literature review requires four stages:

1. Finding a topic or formulating a research question to explore
2. Finding materials relevant to the topic
3. Evaluating these materials for their significance and relevance to the topic
4. Analyzing the materials and arriving at the conclusions you want to explain in your review.

Some useful questions to help you investigate the body of literature and individual works:

- What is known about the topic already? What questions remain?
- How have other researchers approached the topic?
- How do other researchers define key concepts related to the topic?
- What connections exist, theoretically and thematically, within the research?
- What are the major points of agreement and disagreement on the topic, conceptually and/or methodologically?
- What contradictions appear among the works?
- How has understanding of the topic changed over time?
- What are the consistent research findings about the topic?
- How does a particular study contribute to understanding the topic?
- What is a study's relationship to other works under review?

## Structure and development:

### 1) Introduction

- Introduce the topic, issue, or research question to explore.
- Establish the importance of reviewing the literature either to an understanding of the topic or to the development of your original work on the topic.
- State the central idea and purpose of your review (such as the main purpose of your proposed research study based upon what you've learned from your review of prior literature).

### 2) Body

Do not organize the review according to the works reviewed, but according to some clear principle of division. Here are some suggestions for categorizing the materials:

- Comparison of the themes, theories, operational definitions of key concepts, or other key points in the research
- Methods of research used to study the topic
- Chronological order looking at how understanding of the topic has changed over time
- Major trends or findings revealed in the research
- Alternative views on the topic or divergent answers to the research question
- Major themes or theories that recur in the research
- Types of sources studied (primary, secondary)

### 3) Conclusion

Emphasize your major conclusions and state how the existing research will inform your own proposed research study.

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Sources consulted and additional resources:

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/resources/handouts-demos/specific-writing-assignments/literature-reviews>

North Carolina State University: <http://libguides.library.ncat.edu/literaturereview>

University of Wisconsin at Madison: <http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/ReviewofLiterature.html>

University of Santa Cruz: <http://library.ucsc.edu/help/howto/write-a-literature-review>