



WHAT IS A LITERATURE REVIEW?



A literature review is an evaluative comparison of various pieces of research. It aims to show the reader what is known in the field; compare, contrast, and evaluate the major themes and methodologies of current research; recognise major works and authors in the field; and demonstrate any gaps in the literature. As such, it provides context and justification for your own work. Usually, a literature review is guided by a particular concept: a research objective, a problem or issue you are trying to address, or an argumentative thesis. It is important to keep this research concept or question in mind throughout the literature review process.

Depending on your purpose, discipline, and level of study, there are a few different forms a literature review might take.

TYPES OF LITERATURE REVIEWS

AN INTRODUCTION OR SECTION OF A PAPER

Often, a literature review will appear as part of another assignment, such as a research report. This type of literature review appears frequently in journal articles to provide the reader with background information and justify the aims and methods of the research. The purpose of a literature review in an introduction or research paper is very similar. It may:

- Provide an overview of existing knowledge about a topic
- Justify a theoretical framework or methodology to contextualise your work
- Position your work in relation to others

A STAND-ALONE LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review might be a stand-alone assignment that requires you demonstrate your research and evaluation skills. It might ask you to answer a research question or provide an overview of a specific topic. As such, it often requires you to:

- Demonstrate your understanding and knowledge of the topic
- Compare and contrast the main arguments, methodologies, or findings of the topic
- Evaluate and critique the literature
- Synthesise and logically categorise ideas

A CHAPTER IN A THESIS

In a thesis, a literature review may be included as a single chapter that follows the introduction, or it may appear as part of each individual chapter. Its purpose is to provide a comprehensive overview and evaluation of the research in the field with the aim of identifying a gap. As such, it is the most thorough and critically evaluative form of literature review and requires significant and systematic research and analysis. It may involve:

- Providing a historical background of developments in the field
- Highlighting key authors, theories, or methodologies
- Comparing and contrasting methodologies and approaches
- Discussing the scope and limitations of current research
- Highlighting areas of agreement and disagreement in the field
- Evaluate and critique the literature, particularly limitations, disagreements, or major developments
- Identifying gaps in knowledge in order to justify the importance of your research



CONDUCTING RESEARCH

DETERMINING WHAT YOU NEED

Before beginning your search of the literature, it's important to have a strategy:

- **Analyse the question:** Use the content words from your question to collect search terms and then brainstorm synonyms to develop a more comprehensive list.
- **Consider the scope and limitations:** Scope defines what your research will cover, such as population, time period, or theoretical framework. The limitations acknowledge what your research does *not* cover. Knowing these will help you prioritise what is most relevant.
- **Construct your search:** Once you have a set of search terms and an idea of your scope and limitations, begin structuring your search. Use connectors (Boolean operators) such as AND, OR, and NOT to limit search results, or search for particular phrases using double quotation marks, e.g., "climate change". Check the Library resources for more about how to search effectively.



TYPES OF SOURCES

It is important to use **academic sources** that are considered credible in your discipline. Most often, this includes peer-reviewed journal articles and academic books. You can find these using FindIt@Flinders, Google Scholar, and relevant databases. Your selection criteria should also consider:

- **Relevance to your study:** the literature you select must be relevant not just to the topic but to your research question. Only include sources that directly relate to the scope and limitations of your work.
- **Date and place of publication:** Most relevant literature will also be up-to-date, generally within the last 5-10 years, unless it is a landmark publication. It is also important to consider where the research took place and whether the context is similar to your own.
- **Importance to the field:** literature reviews often highlight highly influential or landmark studies. These provide context by showing major developments and debates in the field. They also demonstrate your knowledge of the topic.

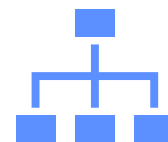


[SEE THE GUIDE ON EFFECTIVE READING STRATEGIES](#)

ORGANISING YOUR RESEARCH

Having a system will help you not only organise your research but determine how to structure your literature review draft. Consider organising the literature by:

- **Themes:** Identify different concepts, questions, or aspects of the topic that appear across different studies. Where do they overlap or differ?
- **Trends or findings:** Look for studies that come to similar conclusions to each other or show how findings have changed over time. Pay attention to similarities and differences, particularly where studies disagree or contradict one another.
- **Theoretical or methodological frameworks:** Categorise different methods and approaches to the topic, considering the strengths and weaknesses of each.



You may choose to make a summary table to help you keep track and categorise what you find as you research. This will be important later to help you **synthesise** the information.



Importantly, record of **all the bibliographic details** of each reference and keep track of citations in your notes. Software such as Endnote can help you with this.



EVALUATING THE LITERATURE

As you research, it is important to be critical and evaluate what you find. This is important not only for determining which sources you will use, but for your discussion in the body of the review. Some criteria to consider include:

Questions to ask	Yes	No
Is the author credible?		
Are the article's aims clearly identified?		
Is there sufficient evidence to support the claims?		
Is there any indication of bias?		
Is the methodology relevant?		
Is the study replicable?		
Is it a landmark study?		
Does it agree with current thought?		
Does it contradict other literature?		
Is the study relevant to your own?		
Are the presented results relevant to the research question?		

[SEE THE GUIDE ON CRITIQUING LITERATURE](#)

STRUCTURING YOUR LITERATURE REVIEW

ORGANISING YOUR REVIEW

There are various ways to structure and organise a literature review depending on its length, complexity, and purpose. However, a standalone or chapter length literature review generally follows a typical academic writing structure including an introduction, body, and conclusion.

- The **introduction** outlines the review's purpose and significance, research question or thesis, scope and limitations (what it will cover), and its organisational structure. It may also include the types of sources used and any criteria for inclusion.
- Each **body paragraph** typically covers a different main idea, much like an academic essay. These may be categorised by themes, methodologies, chronology, the type or quality of studies, or other criteria depending on your purposes. In a longer literature review, you may choose to use headings and sub-headings to categorise and structure the ideas.
- The **conclusion** summarises the main ideas of the review, including any major comparisons or differences in findings or approaches. Importantly, it identifies the gaps in the literature, the implications of the findings, and therefore the significance of the review.

SYNTHESISING AND ANALYSING

Importantly, the body of a literature review is not simply a list or summary of sources; it is a synthesis and critique their quality and significance. Synthesising means both summarising the main idea of a paper and comparing and contrasting it with others to show how they fit together.

If information is well synthesised, you'll be better able to analyse its significance. This means not simply paraphrasing the original authors but interpreting what it means for the purposes of your own study, and in relation to the literature as a whole.

[SEE THE GUIDE ON USING THE RIGHT LANGUAGE](#)



EXAMPLE LITERATURE REVIEW

The following is an example* of some of the key features of a literature review. Remember that the depth of critique, structure, and focus will change depending on your purpose. This is a *general* guide only.

Topic sentence introducing the background and significance of the topic

Links the background and significance to the literature.

Evaluation of the literature

Evaluation narrows to a specific sub-topic

Synthesis of the literature

Connective language to compare and contrast.

Critique and identification of a gap in the literature.

In 2017, Universities Australia recognised the need to support “the development of English language proficiency and academic literacies throughout a degree within disciplinary learning” (p. 3) through the strategic alignment of academic language and literacies development within an embedded curriculum approach, which is increasingly supported in the literature (Arkoudis et al., 2018; Baik & Greig, 2009; Wingate, 2015). Although some of the studies on embedding have been based on small scale research, they have nonetheless documented its multiple benefits for students (Cochrane, 2006; Hattie, Biggs, & Purdie, 1996; Tinto & Purser, 2006). The many gains documented include higher pass marks and greater retention (Arkoudis et al., 2018; Hammill, 2007; Huerta & McMillan, 2004). Bordonaro (2008), for example, found that students achieved higher pass marks when the processes of information literacy and writing were taught simultaneously and embedded into the discipline. Indeed, recent research has shown positive outcomes for students in terms of student learning as measured by academic results (Mort & Drury, 2012) and higher grades among students (Baik & Greig, 2009; Kennelly et al., 2010; Maldoni & Lear, 2016; Thies, 2012). Using a mixed methods approach, Baik and Greig (2009) demonstrated that students enrolled in a content-based ESL program not only generated higher pass rates than non-attendees but were also more likely to achieve superior grades and increases in retention rates one year after the intervention program. Similarly, Hamilton (2016) highlighted the benefits to student learning in a study which used discipline-specific writing models in a collaborative framework between the discipline and literacy expert. However, while the benefits of embedding have been demonstrated, embedding practices have not all been based on the same theoretical framework, nor on equivalent methodological approaches, suggesting the need for a model of best practice.

References

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*Adapted from Maldoni, A. M. (2018). “Degrees of deception” to degrees of proficiency: Embedding academic literacies into the disciplines. *Journal of Academic Language and Learning*, 12(2), A102-A129.