

# Writing a literature review



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# Workshop overview

- What is a Literature Review?
- What is the purpose of a Literature Review?
- How to approach it?
- What should it contain?
- Some advice / tips on writing a critical appraisal of the literature.



# When might you have to undertake a literature review?

- Depends on department requirements, but often an essential part of:
    - A longer essay.
    - Preparation of a scholarly paper.
    - An assignment in e.g. The School of Education.
    - An integral part of a final year or Masters dissertation, or a chapter of a PhD research thesis.
  - Sometimes you may be asked to write one as a separate assignment in the form of an Annotated Bibliography.
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# What is a literature review?

- An overview of the significant literature published on a topic previously by scholars and researchers.
- It should **not** just be a descriptive list of the relevant materials.
- It is **not** the same as a Book Review.

It should be defined by the **scope** of your topic: the issue or the line of argument you are discussing.

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# What materials should it contain?

- An overview of the subject / argument under consideration.
  - A critical overview of the key and relevant sources:
    - Include both print and online materials.
    - Scholarly / Academic monographs (Books).
    - Scholarly / Academic journal articles e.g. available through Jstor.
  - Any other scholarly / academic sources e.g., theses; dissertations; statistics; data; oral transcripts; government or other organisation reports etc.
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# Development of a literature review?

- Before considering your sources, focus on the task or the formulation of a research topic – what is the relevant literature?
  - What topic / field / subject are you examining?
  - Literature search: relevant subject materials?
  - Evaluation of materials: relevant contribution to the topic?
  - Analysis and interpretation: findings and conclusions of the relevant literature.
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# Critical vs. non-critical reading of the relevant literature

- **Non-critical reader:**
    - Reads e.g. a History book to learn the facts of the situation / to discover an accepted interpretation of events.
    - Accepts what is read as facts; takes what is written as a given.
    - Reads a text / piece of work so as to gain knowledge by memorising what is written / certain statements contained within.
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# Critical vs. non-critical reading

- **Critical reader:**
    - A text provides but one portrayal of the facts, one individual's "take" on the subject matter e.g. History book offers one particular perspective / selection of facts.
    - Critical readers thus go beyond **what** a text simply says.
    - Also consider **how** that text portrays the subject matter.
    - Every text is the unique creation of a unique author.
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# Critical appraisal of the literature: considerations

- Employ critical thinking: go beyond simply recognising what the text **says** and restating the key remarks.
  - Reflect on what the text **does** by making such remarks.
  - Does it offer?
    - An argument?
    - Examples and evidence to support the argument?
    - Appeals for sympathy for a particular standpoint or perspective?
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# Critical appraisal of the literature: considerations

- Read, or skim the key works. Then consider where relevant:
  - **What** type of material is it?
  - **When** was it written / published?
  - **Who** wrote it / published it?
- Consider the writer's **purpose**, bias or agenda.
  - Identify the argument and conclusions.
  - Identify any different or similar approaches within the literature.
  - Question surface appearances.



# Critical appraisal of the literature: considerations

- Read / skim the works.
  - Consider:
    - **Provenance:** Author's credentials? Evidence supporting their argument e.g. primary sources, case studies, statistics etc. Theoretical or Empirical?
    - **Objectivity:** Author's perspective? Prejudiced? Bias? Any relevant information ignored?
    - **Persuasiveness:** How convincing is the author's argument?
    - **Value:** Are the author's arguments / conclusions convincing? Contribution to the field?
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# What should a literature review show?

- **Key purpose: places the relevant literature in the specific context.**
    - Highlights the various contributions to the understanding of the topic.
    - Conveys knowledge / ideas already established on the topic.
    - Identifies areas of controversy in the literature.
    - Identifies 'schools of thought': groups of scholars who agree with one particular perspective.
    - Describes the relationship; comparatives; differences; similarities with other relevant materials.
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# What should a literature review show?

- Sometimes it will help to identify a 'gap' in the existing scholarship.
  - Highlights under-developed areas for new / further research (try and then link to your own work).
  - Raises questions requiring further research.
  - Places **your** work in the context of the existing literature.
  - Discusses studies which are **contrary** to your perspective / argument.
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# Some general guidelines

- Subject overview and aims of the literature review.
  - Think about your paragraphing: how will you organise your literature review?
    - Chronological; dated – recent?
    - Thematically?
    - By different schools of thought on the subject?
  - Signposting – discursive writing: highlight your analysis to your reader.
  - Consider your vocabulary!
  - Summary and Synthesis.
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# Summing up ....

- Begin your Literature Review early on, if not first!
- Provides you with a solid background knowledge of the research topic.
- Supplement / improve / streamline / re-draft it as your research progresses.
- Postgraduate level (e.g. PhD) initial literature review is exploratory.
- Re-write at the end to make it more fit for purpose: discard discussions which are no longer relevant / add more relevant sources, latest published research on the topic.
- Use an analysis of the literature to contextualise how your work fits into the picture.

