

7 steps to writing a literature review

1. Narrow your topic and select papers accordingly

Consider your specific area of study. Think about what interests you and what interests other researchers in your field.

Talk to your professor, brainstorm, and read lecture notes and recent issues of periodicals in the field.

Limit your scope to a smaller topic area (ie. focusing on France's role in WWII instead of focusing on WWII in general).

2. Search for literature

Define your source selection criteria (ie. articles published between a specific date range, focusing on a specific geographic region, or using a specific methodology).

Using keywords, search a library database.

Reference lists of recent articles and reviews can lead to other useful papers.

Include any studies contrary to your point of view.

3. Read the selected articles thoroughly and evaluate them

Evaluate and synthesize the studies' findings and conclusions.

Note the following:

assumptions some or most researchers seem to make

methodologies, testing procedures, subjects, material tested researchers use

experts in the field: names/labs that are frequently referenced

conflicting theories, results, methodologies

popularity of theories and how this has/has not changed over time

4. Organize the selected papers by looking for patterns and by developing subtopics

Note the following:

Findings that are common/contested

Important trends in the research

The most influential theories

Tip: If your literature review is extensive, find a large table surface, and on it place post-it notes or filing cards to organize all your findings into categories.

Move them around if you decide that (a) they fit better under different headings, or (b) you need to establish new topic headings.

Develop headings/subheadings that reflect the major themes and patterns you detected

5. Develop a thesis or purpose statement

Write a one or two sentence statement summarizing the conclusion you have reached about the major trends and developments you see in the research that has been conducted on your subject.

6. Write the paper

Follow the organizational structure you developed above, including the headings and subheadings you constructed.

Make certain that each section links logically to the one before and after.

Structure your sections by themes or subtopics, not by individual theorists or researchers.

Tip: If you find that each paragraph begins with a researcher's name, it might indicate that, instead of evaluating and comparing the research literature from an analytical point of view, you have simply described what research has been done.

Prioritize analysis over description.

For example, look at the following two passages and note that Student A merely describes the literature, whereas Student B takes a more analytical and evaluative approach by comparing and contrasting. You can also see that this evaluative approach is well signaled by linguistic markers indicating logical connections (words such as "however," "moreover") and phrases such as "substantiates the claim that," which indicate supporting evidence and Student B's ability to synthesize knowledge.

Student A: Smith (2000) concludes that personal privacy in their living quarters is the most important factor in nursing home residents' perception of their autonomy. He suggests that the physical environment in the more public spaces of the building did not have much impact on their perceptions. Neither the layout of the building nor the activities available seem to make much difference. Jones and Johnstone make the claim that the need to control one's environment is a fundamental need of life (2001), and suggest that the approach of most

institutions, which is to provide total care, may be as bad as no care at all. If people have no choices or think that they have none, they become depressed.

Student B: After studying residents and staff from two intermediate care facilities in Calgary, Alberta, Smith (2000) came to the conclusion that except for the amount of personal privacy available to residents, the physical environment of these institutions had minimal if any effect on their perceptions of control (autonomy). However, French (1998) and Haroon (2000) found that availability of private areas is not the only aspect of the physical environment that determines residents' autonomy. Haroon interviewed 115 residents from 32 different nursing homes known to have different levels of autonomy (2000). It was found that physical structures, such as standardized furniture, heating that could not be individually regulated, and no possession of a house key for residents limited their feelings of independence. Moreover, Hope (2002), who interviewed 225 residents from various nursing homes, substantiates the claim that characteristics of the institutional environment such as the extent of resources in the facility, as well as its location, are features which residents have indicated as being of great importance to their independence.

7. Review your work

Look at the topic sentences of each paragraph. If you were to read only these sentences, would you find that your paper presented a clear position, logically developed, from beginning to end? The topic sentences of each paragraph should indicate the main points of your literature review.

Make an outline of each section of the paper and decide whether you need to add information, to delete irrelevant information, or to re-structure sections.

Read your work out loud. That way you will be better able to identify where you need punctuation marks to signal pauses or divisions within sentences, where you have made grammatical errors, or where your sentences are unclear.

Since the purpose of a literature review is to demonstrate that the writer is familiar with the important professional literature on the chosen subject, check to make certain that you have covered all of the important, up-to-date, and pertinent texts. In the sciences and some of the social sciences it is important that your literature be quite recent; this is not so important in the humanities.

Make certain that all of the citations and references are correct and that you are referencing in the appropriate style for your discipline. If you are uncertain which style to use, ask your professor.

Check to make sure that you have not plagiarized either by failing to cite a source of information, or by using words quoted directly from a source. (Usually if you take three or more words directly from another source, you should put those words within quotation marks, and cite the page.)

Text should be written in a clear and concise academic style; it should not be descriptive in nature or use the language of everyday speech.

There should be no grammatical or spelling errors.

Sentences should flow smoothly and logically.