How to write a literature review

What is a literature review?
A literature review gives a background on what has already been written on your topic. It looks for agreement and disagreement, similarities and differences, consistencies and inconsistencies and any controversy on the topic. It can include theories, concepts or terminology related to your topic. It should also look to see if there are any gaps in knowledge and how your project could address them. From this you can show the relationship between your own research and what already exists. By the end of the literature review it should be clear why your research is relevant and why you are approaching it in your chosen way.
(Ridley, 2012, p. 107)

Some dissertations/projects may just be a literature review. In this case you may need to think about how to theme your chapters/sections.

Good practice
- Identify any shortcomings of research
- Always relate the literature to your research question
- Tell the story: it’s not a list of sources you have read
- It should have an introduction, main body and conclusion like an essay. You may also be able to use headings, but check your guidelines.

Introduction – the literature review introduction provides a profile of the study. Its purpose is to engage the reader by presenting the essential parts of the work
Body – the body presents the case and documents to justify your dissertation, project or thesis
Summation – gives a summary of the research study’s conclusion

When to do a literature search
- As soon as possible. This can inform how you do your research or whether your topic is viable
- It should be a continual process throughout as new literature may be published
- This will demonstrate your grasp of current debate
Possible structure/organisation

- Distant > Close – start with the big picture and progressively focus
- Chronological – how has your topic developed over time?
- Methodological – for example, qualitative versus quantitative approaches
- Thematic – by the themes relevant to your topic. This is probably the most common method chosen.

Remember that you’re trying to tell a meaningful ‘story’

A visual approach to structure/organisation
Some people find it helpful to use diagrams to think about their structure

(Ridley, 2012, p.102)

a) Zooming – starting from wide angle and then focusing on key area
b) Intersections – think about three or four areas linking together with some areas overlapping and your research at the centre
c) Patchworking – piecing together a patchwork of different ideas, weaving them together creatively
d) Funnelling – like zooming
e) Paragraph structure

As with all academic writing, you need to write well-structured paragraphs. Paragraphs are like mini-essays. You should have a paragraph on each of your themes.

You can use the **WEED** model (Godwin, 2014, p. 38)

- **What** - topic sentence – what is your paragraph going to be about?
- **Evidence/Example 1** – what literature supports what you are saying?
- **Evidence/Example 2** – what other literature supports your topic or disagrees with it?
- **Do** - sum up – so what? – what is the relevance of this literature to your topic? It is often this Do part that students forget, but it is very important. It is your commentary on the evidence. You will show your supervisor that you understand its relevant to your topic.
Here is an example of a paragraph using the WEED model

By its very nature, motivation requires a degree of individual satisfaction or narcissism. Robbins et al. (1998) suggest that motivation has as its basis the need to focus on, and please the self. This is supported by Shaw, Shapard and Waugaman (2000) who contend that this narcissistic drive is based upon the human effort to find personal significance in life. It can be argued that the desire to improve one’s status is a highly motivational force, and is central to the idea of narcissistic motivation. The narcissistic motivational strategies put forward by Shaw et al. (2000) are concerned with motivation for life in general, but may also have applications in the context of work. These strategies, with their focus on personal needs, demonstrate that narcissism is an essential component of motivation.

(RMIT University Learning Lab, no date)

**Grouping studies together**

When you are referring to a number of sources that all agree or discuss the same thing, it is good practice to group them together:

“The victims of sexual harassment suffer a range of consequences from lowered self-esteem and loss of self-confidence to withdrawal from social interaction, changed career goals, and depression (Adams et al., 1983; Benson and Thomson, 1982; Dziech and Weiner, 1990).”

(Neuman, 2011, p. 141)

This is preferable to listing the sources e.g. ‘Smith (2012) says... Brown (2013) agrees...Jones (2013) also states’. By grouping what they have said together you are showing that you have understood what the writers are saying, recognising that they are saying the same thing and it can also save you words, helping with your word count.
**Top tips**

- Keep your question in mind – stay focused. Ask yourself – ‘How does this article/book/source relate to my research question?’ If it doesn’t, don’t use it.
- Speed read – don’t think you have to read every word. Read abstracts and conclusions (for articles) or the back cover/preface (for books). Then skim quickly. You can then identify what you want to read in more depth. For help with reading literature quickly, see: [http://tees.libguides.com/ld.php?content_id=14149970](http://tees.libguides.com/ld.php?content_id=14149970)
- Keep records – keep a record of what you have searched for, where you have searched for it and how you searched. Refworks is very good for this: ([http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/refworks](http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/refworks))
- Be critical – capture the key points. How well written is the article? What is the argument? What evidence is used to support the argument? Is the research done well? You can discuss research that has flaws, but it is useful to talk about any weaknesses.
- Use resources available via the Library – not everything is freely available via Google or Google Scholar.
- It’s a story not a list – your literature review should be more like a story than a list of what you’ve read. Show the relevance to your research questions and how the literature supports or contrasts it.
- Don’t be fazed – if you do find different opinions, don’t be fazed. Consider why there are differences. It will help you understand your research question. These differences will help you create and write the ‘story’.

**References**


RMIT University Learning Lab (no date) *Integration of student analysis*. Available at: [https://emedia.rmit.edu.au/learninglab/content/writing](https://emedia.rmit.edu.au/learninglab/content/writing)  (Accessed: 18 June 2019)
Help with writing your literature review


University of Manchester (2019) Academic phrasebank. Available at: http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk
– A bank of phrases appropriate for use in academic writing. It contains two pages particular helpful for literature reviews:
– Referring to Sources: http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/referring-to-sources