Writing Literature Reviews: A Guide for Students

Introduction

What is a Literature Review?

Despite what its name suggests, a literature review is not a review of what we typically think of as "literature" - poetry, novels, short stories, and the like. Rather, a lit review is an analysis of scholarly writing about a particular topic. Its purpose is to explore discoveries made by researchers, arguments put forward, questions that have been answered or unanswered, etc. Think of it this way: Before investing the huge amount of time required to write a paper or a book about a topic, first you'd want to know what others have written about that topic, not only to build off their knowledge, but also to avoid repeating what others have said.

Writing a lit review is an opportunity to find new paths of inquiry through gaps in the research. As such, a lit review is often the beginning of an in-depth project, such as a research paper. That said, sometimes professors will assign a literature review as a standalone assignment since it encourages students to practice valuable skills, such as synthesis, analysis, and evaluation. Thus, by writing a literature review you are developing skills that will benefit you in your studies and likely in your career after graduation!

What are some common expectations of a lit review?

If you've been assigned a lit review your instructor will likely expect the following:

- Thorough, up-to-date, and relevant research that includes ONLY credible, peer-review sources
- A brief (1-2 sentences) and accurate summary of your sources AND an indication of how each of your sources is related to one another (more on this below)
- Definitions of key terminology from your topic
- Proper formatting in the professor's preferred style (ex. APA, ASA, MLA, Chicago)
- Objectivity and balance in your discussion of the research

- An identification of the limitations/gaps in the literature and potential areas for further study/research

Step-by-step Guide

Step 0: First, what not to do?

The most common mistake students make when writing lit reviews is to summarize each of their sources separately, without drawing connections between them. Rather than presenting your research as a list of sources, you want to find relationships between the sources and draw conclusions based on those relationships. You can begin to do this while conducting your research.

Step 1: Research

As you start assembling your sources, consider how you might categorize them based on their focus, argument, methodology, etc. Doing this during the research phase will save you time and effort later. For a great list of guiding questions to ask while you're conducting research, see the following guide from the University of Toronto. If you need help with your research, check out Douglas College's research guides, or get help from a librarian online or in person.

Step 2: Synthesis

Connect your sources to one another by identifying relationships between them. This often involves highlighting themes, trends, commonality, or disagreement in the research.

You can start with a short summary of one of your resources. Then compare it with a second source, then a third source, and so on. Some common ways of comparing/contrasting sources include:

- Discussing areas of focus.
  - **Example:** "In a recent analysis of the literature on literature reviews, Chen et al. (2016) **grouped current research along four lines of focus**:
    - linguistic
    - methodological
    - conceptual
    - ontological" (Badenhorst, 2018)

- Discussing similarities or differences in argument. Do the authors agree or disagree with one another on the key points? Notice the bolded words in the example below

to see what the writer is saying about the relationship between the authors' viewpoints.

- o **Example:** " While such interventions have clearly arisen in response to needs articulated by graduate students, supervisors, and administrators, there is a tendency to focus on an additive model of skills-development instruction to support individual students "deficient" in these skills. Badenhorst et al. (2015) and Lea and Street (2006) **have instead emphasized** that writing is a social practice and students need to participate in ongoing learning and negotiation of academic literacy practices, as well as discourse practices within and across particular disciplines" (Walter & Stouck, 2020)

- Discussing similarities/differences in approach or methodology.
  - ▪ **Example:** "Qian and Krugly-Smolska (2008), **in their exploration of Chinese students' experiences preparing a literature review in Canada**, found that despite participants indicating that forming, developing, and organizing ideas were essential for a good literature review, they still tended to focus on the linguistic challenges of writing a review, specifically vocabulary and sentence-level problems" (Walter & Stouck, 2020)

Step 3: Draw conclusions

Once you've identified connections between your resources, you can begin to draw conclusions based on your findings. For example, is there a focus that none of the authors covered adequately? Are there any questions that the authors have not answered? These might be considered gaps in the research, and therefore, areas for further study.

- **Example:** "There are a number of scholarly (e.g., Boote and Beile Citation2005; Kwan Citation2008) works highlighting the issues and difficulties of conducting literature reviews. These efforts, however, remain sporadic. **Therefore, there is a need to systematically synthesize the challenges facing beginning researchers in conducting literature review**" (Chen et al, 2015)

Alternatively, you could engage in discussions around the topic by taking a stance on areas where there is disagreement. Or you could point out a new way of approaching the topic.

The conclusions from a literature review will often guide the direction of a research project, as unanswered questions or unexplored territory lead to new areas of discovery. This drives new research forward, enabling new scholars like you to take part in the process of knowledge creation.

Troubleshooting:

Where to go if you get stuck while writing your literature review? Douglas College offers many support services, but your best resource is most often your instructor. Every professor provides office hours, during which students can meet and ask questions about assessments, course material, etc. Don't be shy! Visit your professor during office hours or contact them via email. As the author of your literature review assignment, they are best positioned to provide clear and helpful guidance. Also, subject areas have different approaches to writing lit reviews. Your professor is your best resource for the domain-specific literature review conventions of your program.

If after consulting with your instructor you still need help, you can [book an appointment with a writing tutor in the Learning Centre.](#) If you need more help with finding articles for your review, [you can get help from a librarian](#).

Finally, there are many great resources online. One favourite is the aforementioned [University of Toronto guide](#). [Purdue's Online Writing Lab](#) has great advice about how to organize and structure a literature review. [The University of British Columbia guide](#) includes detail about the different types of literature reviews out there. [Vancouver Island University](#) also has an excellent guide to writing literature reviews.

Conclusion

What do you gain from writing a literature review?

If you're new to writing literature reviews, it may seem difficult at first. Remember, the greater the challenge, the greater the exercise; by writing a literature review, you practice valuable cognitive skills, including evaluation and synthesis of information, critical thinking, problem solving, analysis, and ideation. These skills will likely come in handy in your career after graduation, giving you the ability to take large amounts of information from multiple sources and use it to contribute new and valuable ideas to the world. In the end, this will make you a more well-rounded, capable, and knowledgeable individual.

References

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