

A literature review provides an overview of studies that have been published on a particular topic. In other words, it reviews *literature* that currently exists on that topic. A literature review can be an entire assignment by itself, or it may be part of a longer research paper or study. In either case, the purpose of the literature review is the same: to briefly summarize and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each source, while pointing out overall trends, contradictions, or gaps between sources.

If you are including the literature review as a part of a larger research assignment, you have one further task. In addition to summarizing and evaluating each source, you need to explain how these studies relate to your own research. For example, if you are writing a proposal for an *original experiment*, you will need to demonstrate how your study is similar to or different from previous studies. In this way, the literature review allows you to show how your study is unique, and gives you an opportunity to justify the choices you have made in your own study based on your knowledge of previous studies. On the other hand, if the literature review is part of a larger *research assignment*—especially if you are being asked to choose a side or argue an opinion based on your research—then you are going to use these sources to develop and defend your opinions on that issue. In your literature review, you should therefore state whether you will be using each source to support your own ideas or to provide contradictory information that you will argue against in your analysis.

#### Tips for Choosing Sources for Your Literature Review

- Use scholarly books and journal articles, since these are the types of documents that discuss original studies and new theories.
- Try to include recent studies as well as older, “classic” sources on your topic. (Hint: Classic sources are often cited by other researchers.)
- Don’t try to cover all sources on a given topic. Discuss only those studies that are directly related to your own topic or research question.

#### Tips for Summarizing and Evaluating Empirical Studies

When summarizing each study, try to answer the following questions:

- What is the purpose of this study?
- What is the author’s hypothesis (i.e. prediction)?
- What method was used?
- What were the main findings or conclusions of this study?

Before evaluating the quality and importance of the source, you should read through it entirely. Don’t just skim the abstract or summary: those sections often don’t contain enough information to provide you with the basis for an accurate and thorough evaluation. However, when looking for limitations in a particular study, you should check the Discussion section near the end of an article for the author’s disclosure of the limitations of the study.

In your evaluation of each study, consider the following factors:

- **Focus:** Most studies try to answer a very specific question. What other aspects of this topic aren't being explored in this study?
- **Participants:** How did the researcher choose participants? Was there some bias in the kind of participants who were selected for a study? Has the researcher paid attention to the demographics of the participants (e.g. gender, race/ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status)? Are the participants representative of the targeted population? Were they chosen at random from a population? Is the number of participants (i.e. the sample) large enough to produce reliable results? If a survey was used, what was the response rate?
- **Variables:** Did the author overlook or ignore other variables that could have influenced the results?
- **Analysis:** How did the researchers analyze the data? Did they do it in a consistent and systematic way? Did they use an acceptable and reliable method of analysis? Also, does the data match or support the author's interpretations of that data?
- **Process:** Was the process described in sufficient detail?
- **Consistency:** Was the process consistent across individual participants or groups? Are the results internally inconsistent? i.e., in the same study, do any of the results contradict each other?
- **Instruments:** What kind of instruments or tools were used? Are they appropriate instruments to use in this study? Are the instruments measuring what they are supposed to measure? (i.e. are they "valid" instruments?) Are the tools that were used to collect data or measure results flawed in some way?
- **Contribution:** Has this study provided new insight on the topic? In the context of your discussion, is it an important study?

### **Tips for Organizing and Comparing Sources in Your Literature Review**

Rather than discuss each study separately, or discuss them chronologically, it's more helpful for your reader if you group similar studies together by category or theme. You decide how to group them, but there should be some logical order. For instance, you could group your sources according to their theoretical approach; you could discuss studies that examine causes of a particular phenomenon before you discuss studies that measure effects; you might sort your sources into qualitative studies versus quantitative studies; or, if you're looking at causes of a certain condition, you could organize your discussion around types of risk factors.

When you're grouping studies, you should look for consensus or disagreement between studies: do these sources present similar conclusions, or do they contradict each other?

Look for gaps in the literature—questions that aren't being answered, methods that haven't been used, types of participants that have traditionally been excluded from these studies—and speculate on why these gaps may exist. If appropriate, make suggestions for future research in this area.