

What is a Review of the Literature (also known as a Lit Review)?

A Review of the Literature is a section in a research study or a paper in its own right that shows the writings related to a topic. When it is drafted as a stand-alone paper, it is often written as a meta-analysis (an analysis of others’ research and findings).

What is the Purpose of a Lit Review?

A Lit review may serve any or all of these functions:

- Shares the results of studies related to the topic
- Points out the research gaps in the ongoing dialogue in the literature
- Provides a context for understanding a topic (historical, theoretical)

How is a Lit Review Organized?

A Lit Review can be organized around themes, concepts, chronology, or major works (this is not shown as a model here because it is not recommended). Note that thematic and conceptual structures are preferred.

Thematic Organization

This structure groups information based on the themes that emerge from the body of literature. It might be grouped as follows:

Problem to solution

- Definitions of the problem
- themes in causes,
- themes in effects
- themes in proposed solutions

Results

- Positive results
- Negative results
- Neutral results
- Analysis

Variable Perspectives

- Overview of the issue
- Literature about the independent variable
- Literature about the dependent variable
- Causal or correlation findings

Methods

- Quantitative studies (analysis/critique)
- Qualitative studies (analysis/critique)
- Mixed methods (analysis/critique)
- Recommendation

Conceptual Organization

General to Specific

- General picture of the topic
- Literature explaining each key concepts/ issue individually (usually one per paragraph)

Chronological Organization

This structure moves through the literature chronologically in one of two patterns:

- *Past to Present*: Inception of theory to most recent findings
- *Present, past, present*: Most recent questions being raised, then flash-back to early underpinnings, then follow forward to current literature.

How Do I Structure the Literature Review?

How you structure the Lit Review will depend on which organizational approach you choose. In general, you need the following content:

- Introduction: Provide context or example of issue and. Offer research question. Finish with thesis.
- Background: Might show history, theory, operational definitions or relevance of problem to society

- Body (depending on organization strategy). Each section (paragraph) should include:
 1. General statement/ topic sentence
 2. Explanation of general statement
 3. Summary or quote of specific source
 4. Analysis of that source and/or connection to another source
 5. Synthesis of ideas

- Findings/ Recommendations for future study or relevance of issue to society
- Conclusion: sum up findings in a synthesis and draw conclusions (hypothesize)

When Summarizing and Reviewing a Source, What Should I Include?

Before writing the Lit Review, create an annotated bibliography. For each source, document the following:

- All citation information: Author, date, title, journal, database etc
- Authority of the authors: field of study, university or research group affiliation, expertise
- Summarize the problem being addressed or show the research question
- Identify the central theme of the study
- Describe the population/sample being studied
- Describe the methodology
- State the major conclusions
- Note flaws in the reasoning, methods, or presentation of the study

How do I Begin To Assemble the Information?

1. Annotate the research: write notes in margins and/or on note cards or post-its
2. Look for themes that occur across sources (these could be of time, or of concept as much as theme). In other words, you are “coding” the information.
3. Identify a few major categories
4. Group the information by those categories, listing a source and possibly page #, or using the post-its/note cards (this can be done in a mapping process)
5. Ask yourself, what does this all seem to say? Why is it important? The answer to that will help you form a thesis statement.