



Writing the Literature Review

Component #1 Overview of Your Research Focus: Introduce the problem/issue you will focus on, but get to your specific focus quickly. This part should not review everything you have learned about the research problem/topic; choose only what is relevant to help explain your focus and set up the literature you will review.

Component #2 Introducing the Theoretical Framework: This section should provide the theoretical underpinnings of the problem/issue you are focusing on. It should show clearly how your problem/issue fits within the broader theories related to your research problem.

Component #3 Explain What Research Has Already Been Done on Your Topic: This section should answer the question: *How does my research focus fit into the field as a whole?* You are entering an academic dialogue when you begin a literature review. Contextualize your research question by providing background research. Here are several tips for reviewing literature/research related to your topic:

1. **Focus:** cite only literature related to your specific research focus.
2. **Compare/contrast** the various arguments, theories, methodologies, and findings expressed in the literature. Here are questions your analysis should address:
 - What do the authors agree on?
 - Which articles apply similar approaches to analyzing the research problem that you will take?
 - What do experts in the field seem to disagree on or approach differently?
 - What are the debates or controversies in the field?
3. **Identify** the gaps, problems or unresolved issues in the existing knowledge/research that your research can fill. Here are the questions you will consider:
 - What has the previous research NOT done that your study will do?
 - How does your research depart from what has been done before?
 - What makes your work distinctive?
 - “The previous research has mistakenly assumed that....” or “Although most experts in the field believe, they have overlooked ...”
 - “None of the previous research has examined”
 - “Despite prior observations of, it remains unclear why/how.....”

Connect or build upon the existing knowledge/research to your own area of research and investigation. Here are the questions you should consider when connecting your work to previous work:

What does your research draw upon from previous research?
How does your own work draw upon or synthesize what has been said in the literature?

- “Consequently, these factors need to be examined in more detail....”
- “Evidence suggests an interesting correlation between A & B; therefore, it is desirable to survey different respondents....”

Writing Tip: Organizing Your Sources

The part of your paper in which you review the literature is the most “dense” section of your paper because it contains the most information. BUT, you want to avoid making it a kind of “knowledge dump.” To avoid this, the literature review should be carefully structured so that “non-expert” readers (readers who aren’t familiar with the literature) can understand the key arguments underpinning your research in relation to that of the work done by others in your field.

Organizing the Overall Literature Review: A good strategy is to break the literature into ISSUES or THEMES or TOPICS instead of going in chronological order by date of publication or in some other order. These themes or topics can be organized in several ways: 1) around the various positions taken by researchers; 2) around the various methods/findings of previous research; 3) around various implications of the previous research, etc.. **IMPORTANT:** The issues/themes should be organized in such a way that readers can discern a storyline. In other words, you should create connections between each topic and build to your research focus. Build on conclusions from previous research that lead to the problem/issue you are focusing on and the position you will take. Also demonstrate places where there are gaps in previous research because of incomplete methodology or flawed assumptions.

Organizing Each Article within the Issues/Themes: When you are presenting each study or article within a section, they should be ordered to present a storyline and to lead to your research focus and argument. To do this, it is important to draw explicit connections for the reader between each piece of literature that you present.

Component #4 Research Question/Hypothesis/Thesis: Based on the previous research that you have reviewed, what will your research question be (i.e., what specific issue or question will your paper address?) What is your predicted answer to that question? Very briefly provide your hypothesis and/or the answer to your research question that your data will support. In other words, what will we find out from your research?

Writing Tip: Stating Your Thesis

Non-argumentative literature review: If you are writing a **non-argumentative thesis**, or one that simply synthesizes what you have found out about your research topic in doing the literature review, your thesis will look something like:

- Evidence from previous research suggests an interesting correlation between A & B.
- Previous research has examined Factors A, B and C, noting that
- The literature reviewed here suggests that while A is important, B must also be taken into account when considering Problem Z.

Argumentative literature review: If you are writing **an argumentative thesis**, your thesis statement or knowledge claim will position your research in the “gap” that you have identified in previous research.

Sources:

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