

Literature Reviews: Six Steps to Success

A literature review is a critical, analytical account of the existing research on a particular topic.



1. Refine your topic

- Brainstorm on paper or have a discussion around your topic with someone else.
- Identify what you already know and what you need to find out.
- What 'angle' do you anticipate that your argument will take?
- List some key words and synonyms related to your topic.
- Unpacking definitions and word etymologies are great ways of beginning your research – this will familiarise you with your topic and help refine your argument.

Drawing mind-maps can help in the early stages of planning. Getting all your ideas onto paper is a great way to filter and organise topics. Try numbering your points in order of importance, relevance and linkage.

2. Plan your Research

Before you start, decide:

- How will you track bibliographic information? (Refworks, Zotero, etc.)
- How will you record and organise important ideas as you read?
- How will you store printed articles?

3. Search for Sources

- Use your key words from step 1 when searching.
- Use a variety of sources: books, journals, internet, lectures, seminar and tutorial discussions, questionnaires (your topic will determine which are most appropriate).
- Decide how recent your sources should be – specifying years will help refine searches.



The library offers support for this if you have trouble finding what you need. Just contact your subject librarian.

See www.qub.ac.uk/lib

4. Read and Record

- Read Strategically: Begin with the abstract and then identify each section to focus your reading.
- Read Critically: Identify and evaluate strengths and weakness key elements such as research questions, hypothesis, methods, findings and main arguments or interpretation.
- Record: Be sure to record all important points as well as your own reflections during your reading process and store these in an organized way so that you can access this information easily later without having to search again.

Check out the downloadable resources available on the Learning Development Website for critical reading such as the 'Critical Notes' handout and the 'Research Quicknotes' sheet. These will help you identify some of the key components for being critical.

Also see: Wallace, M. and Poulson, L. (2003) 'Critical reading for Self-critical writing' in *Learning to Read Critically in Teaching and Learning*, London: Sage Publications.

Using mind maps or free writing after reading multiple sources may help you identify where authors arguments connect and disconnect. It may also help you prepare to create a structured outline.

5. Reflect and Organise

- Take some time to process what you have read (e.g. free write).
- Organize notes, sources, important points and potential quotes into an outline with an introduction, main body and conclusion.
- The main body should be organized by topics/themes, not by sources reviewed.
- Be as specific as possible with your outline so that when you write, you can focus on your writing style.

6. Write, revise, reference

- Begin writing – you may wish to organize your main body using subheadings.
- Use your introduction to set out the structure for your writing.
- Regularly proofread your sections to be sure that you are connecting the main points and not repeating yourself.
- Have someone read your essay for you or book an appointment with an LDS tutor to get feedback.
- Use your referencing style guide or student handbook!

