

Organise your Literature Review

A literature review is a critical, analytical account of the existing research on a particular topic. You may be asked to write such a piece in the course of your studies or encounter it when you are writing your dissertation.

As students often find writing a literature review a difficult task, this resource provides some helpful tips on how to possibly structure and approach it. Keep the following in mind:

What is the purpose of your literature review?

- To provide an overview of the “big issue”
- To select some of these issues for your future research
- To summarise other people’s work
- To evaluate other people’s work
- To provide context for your future research
- To identify gaps in the existing literature
- To develop an understanding of a theory or method



Depending on the purpose of your literature review, you might review the literature accordingly. The following questions are therefore recommendations to help you:

Questions the literature review could ask

- What were the aims and objectives mentioned in the body of literature?
- What approaches / schools of thought / theories / methods / strategies were used?
- In what context were the research publications conducted?
- What were the outcomes of the publications?
- What is each publication’s contribution to the field?
- What gaps / problems are evident?
- Do publications relate to my own research?

Questions a literature review could answer

- Why is this subject important?
- Who has worked on this subject before?
- What overall themes, methods and theories were used?
- How do the publications relate to other research fields?
- What are the gaps in the research?
- Who has done something similar to what I will be doing in my research?
- What can be adapted to my own study?
- What will my contribution be in this field?

These questions should provide you with an idea what to look out for in the literature and how to synthesise publications. Specifically literature reviews for **dissertations** are designed to **identify a gap** within the existing literature. This gap is the starting point of your own work and should help to justify your own research approach.

How to start:

Take some time to process what you have read before you start writing. It can be helpful to organise notes, sources, important points and potential quotes into a **word processor** such as Microsoft Word to have everything centrally collected. This enables you to **look for keywords** via the search function and guarantees that you do not miss relevant information.

Prompts for the initial writing about the literature are:

- Ask yourself what you already know about the literature
- Use bullet points and mind maps to cluster ideas
- On the basis of these ideas you may wish to organise your writing using subheadings which can help you to create an outline of your literature review
- These subheadings could be based on the above outlined questions

Tip: Find a Model Review! Look for (Systematic) Literature Reviews in your discipline. Read them to get a sense of the types of themes and ways to organise your own work.

Structuring your literature review:

- **Introduction**
 - Sets out the general research area/problem which is summarised
 - Provides information on the importance of this research area/problem
 - Sets out the structure of the writing
- **Main Body**
 - Is organised in accordance to the purpose of the literature review
 - Can be structured using the subheadings you have come up with
 - Provides an overall summary and synthesis of the topics/themes, theories, methods, findings, problems etc. reviewed
- **Conclusion**
 - Summarises the findings of the literature review without repeating yourself
 - Provides an outlook for future research
 - If you are writing a dissertation the conclusion of your literature review will lead over to your own research (i.e., method). Your research will be based on the identified gaps and problems and justifies the approach you take

Suggestions for your writing style:

- “Traditionally, XY was concerned with...”
- “At the start of the XY century and with the rise of XY...”
- “Among the more influential writers on the subject are XY...”
- “To date no research within the field of XY appears to have...”
- “The writing of X and Y allow for synthesis of the general ideas within the literature on XY...”
- “On the basis of this literature it possible to argue that XY is...”

Tip: You do not need to demolish the existing literature. Be critical and find weaknesses but do so in an engaging way which helps to create links between publications.
Engage with the LDS resources on “Critical Reading and Writing”.

If you experience difficulties contact your lecturer/supervisor or the Learning Development Service for further guidance.