

Common Genre Guide: Literature Reviews

What disciplines or types of assignments use literature reviews?

Literature reviews are a common feature of advanced scholarly writing in a variety of fields. Undergraduate students at Cabrini may be asked to write a literature review as an extension of an annotated bibliography, as a stand-alone document, or as part of a larger project, such as a research methods proposal or capstone. Literature reviews are sometimes a distinct section of a paper, and sometimes they are integrated into a longer introduction section.

Why are literature reviews so challenging for writers?

Literature reviews can be especially challenging because they involve entering a new discourse community – an ongoing conversation with many voices and perspectives that proceeds through a set of sometimes clearly stated and sometimes implicit expectations. As a newcomer to the conversation, you need to figure out, essentially, who you want to talk with, how you want to step into the conversation, and what you want to add to the dialogue.

It can also be challenging to figure out the boundaries of the conversation that you want to be a part of. How much of the literature am I responsible for? Do I really need to read everything that's ever been written about *King Lear*? Probably not, but the challenge is to figure out which foundational ideas are relevant to you and how you want to carve out a niche conversation, say, the literature on representations of nature and how they intersect with gender in the play.

What is the purpose of writing a literature review?

A literature review provides important **context** for your investigation. It is an opportunity to articulate how your study relates to that which has come before by connecting themes from across different sources that provide relevant background and that situate or position your own study within the literature (Cisco 2014).

The literature review can also help support the rationale for your own study by leading to a **gap** in the current literature. In doing so, the literature review explains to readers what has been established in the field on your topic, and what still remains to be explored or understood better (Denney & Tewksbury, 2013).

By providing a research-based context for your own study, and by supplying evidence for why your own study is needed, the literature review helps you to demonstrate to readers that you are a **scholar and a researcher**. Boote and Beile (2005) argue that doing good research requires academic writers (and that includes you!) to show that they are not only researchers who can design and carry out new studies, but that they are also scholars who have read in their field carefully and thoroughly, and who can speak or write with some authority about the most important concepts, issues, or problems within a field of study or related to a specific topic. Demonstrating your scholarship through the literature review lends meaning and significance to your new contribution to the field.

What is a literature review?

According to Cisco (2014), a literature review is “a thematic synthesis of sources used to provide readers with an up-to-date summary of theoretical and empirical findings on a particular topic” (p. 42).

The keyword here is **synthesis**. Think of a synthetic fabric, woven together out of different materials. Synthesis requires you to combine information from multiple sources in order to tell an original research story that is relevant to your own research question, hypothesis, or argument (Darowski et al, 2016).

What does a literature review look like?

In an undergraduate writing context, a literature review may be several paragraphs or several pages.

One way to organize a literature review is to focus it around the variables of your proposed study or hypothesis, or the key terms of your argument. For instance, if you are investigating the relationship between the frequency of writing center use and self-efficacy, you would likely have a section of your lit review that focuses on studies that research patterns of writing center use, including frequency, which could further be broken down by different demographic information, such as year in school. In addition, you would want another section of the lit review to focus on what we know about self-efficacy, particularly as it impacts learning and writing performance. The literature review might conclude with studies at the intersection of both of these topics (the studies most relevant to your own) or by pointing out what is not yet fully known at the intersection of these topics, and then finish off with your hypothesis (as applicable).

Individual paragraphs should be organized around a major claim about a topic that is usually supported by more than one study. A paragraph may focus on only one study in particular if it really stands out from the rest of the research in some way and deserves special discussion.

Here are some sentence starters that may give you an idea of what topic sentence claims can sound like:

- Over the past two decades, researchers have largely focused on the relationship between...
- Several recent studies have found...
- While such-and-such-a-theory emphasizes..., alternative perspectives focus on....
- The literature on such-and-such-specific-topic demonstrates...

Typically, literature review paragraphs are then developed by paraphrasing the main ideas, arguments, or findings from the scholarly literature you have read. In APA style, for instance, a sentence that summarizes a trend found across multiple articles may cite several sources in the parenthetical citation at the end of that sentence.

Direct quotation should usually be avoided, though you may want to occasionally highlight a specific key term that is significant to the discussion.

You may also consider following your paraphrase with moments of analysis, where you point out the significance, strengths, insights, or perhaps even the shortcomings, of the sources under discussion. Be sure to make the relationships between sources clear to your reader.

How do I go about writing a literature review?

Writing literature reviews is a complex task, because it requires that writers be able to read, understand, analyze, situate, and synthesize information from multiple sources, written for an audience of professional scholars and researchers. Breaking the task down into steps will likely be helpful, as will giving yourself enough time to gather feedback and revise.

Consider trying out these planning strategies:

- Create a mind map that centers on your variables or key terms and links them to sub-topics and relevant articles.
- Create a chart that identifies shared themes or concepts (listed on one side of the chart) that can be traced across several studies (listed on the other side of the chart). Then, in the body of the chart, you can fill in how each source specifically relates to that theme or concept. (This strategy is adapted from the SOAR process detailed in Luo & Kiewra, 2019).
- Create short summaries of each article that you read on the front of an index card (or a sheet of paper). On the back, list key words or important themes that relate to that source. Group cards together based on their shared theme(s) and organize paragraphs that include each grouping.
- Write a “zero draft” for each source you plan to include in the literature review. This involves simply writing a quick summary, and then, crucially, *your response to the source*. When you have these pieces drafted, you can play around with them easily, copying and pasting them to move them around and see which ones begin to fit together into larger chunks.

For more on writing literature reviews, check out the Holy Spirit Library Guide at <https://cabrini.libguides.com/literaturereview>.

References

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