

What is a literature review?

A literature review discusses published information in a subject area within a certain time period. They are useful reports that keep them up to date with what is current in the field and provide a solid background for a research paper's investigation. A literature review it usually combines both summary and synthesis.

- **Summary:** Recapping the important information of the source.
- **Synthesis:** Weaving information from multiple sources to arrive at a higher level of understanding. It might give a new interpretation of old material, combine new with old interpretations, or trace the intellectual progression of the field, including major debates.

Literature review vs. research paper

The focus of an *academic research paper* is to develop a new argument, and may even contain a literature review as one of its parts. The focus of a *literature review*, however, is to summarize and synthesize the arguments and ideas of others without adding new contributions; thus, almost every sentence in a literature review is cited except introduction and conclusion paragraphs as well as topic and concluding sentences of some paragraphs in the body of the paper. A literature review, like a research paper, is usually organized around ideas, not the sources themselves as an annotated bibliography would be organized. This means that *you do not just simply list* your sources and go into detail about each one of them, one at a time.

- **Find models:** Look for other literature reviews in your area of interest or in the discipline and read them to get a sense of the types of themes you might want to look for in your own research or ways to organize your final review.
- **Narrow your topic:** There are hundreds or even thousands of articles and books on most areas of study. The narrower your topic, the easier it will be to limit the number of sources you need to read to get a good survey of the material.
- **Ask questions:** Do they present one or different solutions? Is there an aspect of the field that is missing? How well do they present the material and do they portray it according to an appropriate theory? Do they reveal a trend in the field? A raging debate? Use these questions to find themes that will help you focus the organization of your review.

Organization

What is the most effective way of presenting the information? What are the most important topics, subtopics, etc., that your review needs to include? And in what order should you present them? Develop an organization for your review at both a global and local level. Just like most academic papers, literature reviews have at least three basic elements: an introduction, a body containing the discussion of sources, and a conclusion.

Typical ways of organizing the sources:

- **Chronological:** If your review follows the chronological method, you could write about the materials above according to when they were published. For instance, first you would talk about the British biological studies of the 18th century, then about *Moby Dick*, published in 1851, then the book on sperm whales in other art (1968), and finally the biology articles (1980s) and the recent articles on American whaling of the 19th century
- **Thematic:** Thematic reviews of literature are organized around a topic or issue, rather than the progression of time.
- **Methodological:** A methodological approach differs from the two above in that the focusing factor usually does not have to do with the content of the material. Instead, it focuses on the "methods" of the researcher or writer.

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Begin composing

Once you've settled on a general pattern of organization, you're ready to write each section. There are a few guidelines you should follow during the writing stage as well. To illustrate this type of writing, here is a sample paragraph from a literature review by Falk and Mills (1996) about sexism and language:

However, other studies have shown that even gender-neutral antecedents are more likely to produce masculine images than feminine ones (Gastil, 1990). Hamilton (1988) asked students to complete sentences that required them to fill in pronouns that agreed with gender-neutral antecedents such as "writer," "pedestrian," and "persons." The students were asked to describe any image they had when writing the sentence. Hamilton found that people imagined 3.3 men to each woman in the masculine "generic" condition and 1.5 men per woman in the unbiased condition. Thus, while ambient sexism accounted for some of the masculine bias, sexist language amplified the effect. (p. 38)

Note the use of several sources to make a larger point. A literature review in this sense is just like any other academic research paper. Your interpretation of the available sources must be backed up with evidence to show that what you are saying is valid.

Be selective

Select only the most important points in each source to highlight in the review. The type of information you choose to mention should relate directly to the review's focus, whether it is thematic, methodological, or chronological.

Use quotes sparingly

The example above does not contain any direct quotes because the survey aspect of the literature review does not allow for in-depth discussion or detailed quotes from the text. Some short quotes here and there are okay, though, if you want to emphasize a point, or if what the author said just cannot be rewritten in your own words. Notice that Falk and Mills briefly quote certain terms that were taken directly from the cited study.

Summarize and synthesize

Remember to summarize and synthesize your sources within each paragraph as well as throughout the review. The authors in the excerpt above recapitulate important features of Hamilton's study, but then synthesize it by rephrasing the study's significance and relating it to their own work.

Keep your own voice

While the literature review presents others' ideas, your voice (the writer's) should remain front and center. Notice how the authors weave references to multiple sources but still maintain their own voice by starting and ending the paragraph with their own words. Overall, the sources *support* what Falk and Mills are saying but don't *dominate* the paragraph.

Falk, E., & Mills, J. (1996). Why Sexist language affects persuasion: The role of homophily, intended audience, and offense. *Women and Language*, 19(2), 36–44.

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