

Writing a Literature Review

What is a literature review?

A literature review is a compilation of previous research and writing on a particular topic. It provides a critical analysis of this research and writing through summary, classification, comparison and evaluation. In a literature review you are required to present:

- ★ established findings
- ★ conflicting evidence
- ★ gaps

in the body of scholarship relating to your topic.

In what courses do you write literature reviews?

Students in the Australian School of Business are required to write literature reviews in a number of different courses within the Faculty.

If you are undertaking a research degree or if you are undertaking an honours year you will be required to write a literature review at some time. This may be for any and/or all of the following:

- ★ before you write your thesis
- ★ as a section of your thesis proposal
- ★ as a chapter of your thesis.

You may also be required to write a literature review in an undergraduate pass degree and in a course work masters degree. This may be as a section of a paper in which you report some research you have undertaken or as an assignment in itself.

In a literature review assignment in the Faculty of Business you may be expected to review:

- ★ a wide range of the literature on one topic
- ★ several examples of the literature on one topic
- ★ one article only in relation to the other literature in the field.

(In the case of these last two consult the EDU handout on writing a critical review for guidance. This handout on writing a literature review is for assignments in which you are expected to review a wide range of the literature on a topic.)

Why are you asked to write a literature review?

You are asked to write literature reviews in some of your courses so that you can demonstrate to your lecturers that you are able to:

- ★ determine what has already been written on a topic
- ★ identify previous approaches to the topic
- ★ identify central issues in the field
- ★ integrate what previous researchers have found
- ★ identify important issues still unresolved.

What steps must you take in preparing to write a literature review?

There are a number of steps to undertake before you write the literature review. You need to:

- ★ formulate a problem in your field of study
- ★ familiarise yourself with a broad range of texts that deal with that problem
- ★ decide on the texts you wish to include in your review
- ★ decide on the most appropriate way to classify the texts
- ★ identify the key issues
- ★ critically analyse what you have read
- ★ identify important issues that are still unresolved
- ★ write a draft of the review
- ★ read and think about what you have written and then rewrite.

How might you classify different writings on your topic?

You may use the following sub-headings to classify what you have read, or you may narrow the focus of your review to deal with some of these categories only. Or there may be still other categories that are more appropriate for your research. For example:

- ★ research outcomes
- ★ research methods
- ★ theories
- ★ applications
- ★ integration of the works of others
- ★ criticism of previous work
- ★ building of bridges between related topics
- ★ identification of central issue(s).

What is the structure of a literature review?

A literature review has an introduction, a body and a conclusion like most other writing you do at university.

Introduction

In the introduction you should:

- define or identify the general topic, issue or area of concern
- point out overall trends in what has already been published
- establish your point of view for reviewing the literature
- indicate the organisation of the review.

Body

In the body you should:

- group research studies and other relevant literature according to a common theme
- summarise each item of the literature appropriately according to its significance
- compare and evaluate each item of the literature
- provide topic sentences at the beginning of paragraphs and summary sentences at the end of sections to help the reader understand what the main issues are.

Conclusion

In the conclusion you should:

- summarise the literature maintaining the focus presented in the introduction
- evaluate the current "state of the art", pointing out gaps in the literature, inconsistencies and issues that are important for future study
- conclude by giving some insight into the relationship between your topic and a larger area of study or area of professional practice.

What makes a good literature review?

A good literature review:

- clearly delimits the subject matter to be reviewed
- covers all important relevant literature
- is up-to-date
- provides an insightful analysis of the ideas and conclusions in the literature
- points out similarities and differences, strengths and weaknesses in the literature
- identifies gaps in the literature for future research
- identifies the context for which the literature is important.