Literature Review

A **literature review** is a summary of the most recent, relevant, and renowned research in a given field. The purpose of the literature review is to demonstrate to the reader that the writer is knowledgeable about previously written research relating to the writer's chosen topic.

The writer may be asked to complete a literature review as part of a larger assignment, or the literature review could be an assignment in itself. The types of sources used will depend on the professor's instructions, but the literature review is typically a synthesis of important books, journal articles, legislation, and organizational reports on the writer's issue of significance.

Summarizing & Combining Ideas

- A literature review can be a simple summary of what other authors have written on a topic that recaps to the reader the authors' most relevant findings.
- A literature review typically, but not exclusively, shows how major debates in an academic field on a particular topic have progressed.

How a Literature Review Differs from a Research Paper

Research papers often advance an author's argument, and sometimes the literature review is a part of the research paper that demonstrates the writer's familiarity with major contributions to the field/argument/topic.

Literature reviews summarize and synthesize arguments and ideas of others without adding the writer's new contributions (these new contributions are what the research paper does beyond the literature review).

Questions to Ask About Your Literature Review Sources

1. Does the author have a clearly defined problem or issue with a stated significance?
2. What is the author's research orientation (quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, theoretical, critical, or some combination)?
3. Does the author have a theoretical framework (Marxist, positivist, postmodern, feminist, critical race theorist, etc.)?
4. Does the author acknowledge literature pertinent to the author's own study, even literature which may disagree with the author's argument?
5. Is the author objective or are they merely seeking to confirm what they think they already know?
6. Does the information create new understanding of the problem or issue and how it could be useful for the discipline in general?
7. How does the text specifically relate to the questions I'm exploring and answers I'm seeking?

Different Types of Literature Review

Research Proposal (Literature Review PLUS the Writer's New Argument)
- Explains the current issues and theories in relation to a topic
- May demonstrate how the writer's research will further exploration in a given field

VERSUS

Stand-Alone Review (Literature Review ONLY)
- Shows an analysis and comprehension of research conducted on a specific subject

Getting Started, Before You Write the Review

- **Visit the university's reference librarian desk** or call them (815-836-5306) for help finding sources related to your topic.

- **Ask your professor how many sources to include** and whether or not you're to remain objective or be critical.

- **Consider what type of sources you should use.** Typically academic books and peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles are best, but organizational reports and group policy statements are acceptable as well.

- **Review a References list, or Bibliography, or Works Cited section from previous papers** you have written in the subject area. They can be good starting points for thinking about a literature review before doing your own new research.

- **Try to narrow your topic.** This way you might need to read less sources in order to get a good material survey. Ask your professor for a recommendation, for example "If you had to recommend one text from the 2010s on neoliberalism and public utilities in Lusophone Africa what would it be?"

Organization of a Literature Review

Introduction: Similar to a traditional paper, this section gives some background information and previews the topic that will be explored in the literature review.

Body: This is where you discuss what you have found in the literature. The approach to this might be different depending on what you as the writer would like to focus on. For example, you can organize this information chronologically or thematically.

- One helpful way to think about *how* to write about sources is to write about a text's **purpose**, its **evidence**, and its **conclusions**.

  ⇒ i.e. Bulfin (2017) **explores** the intersection between Baudrillard's simulation theory and war pedagogy in the college classroom. His **study found** that…Ultimately, Bulfin (2017) concludes that war pedagogy is undertheorized. He **argues** that…

Conclusion: In this section, you review what you have learned and may even make a suggestion for what direction the conversation or research on your topic should take.

Example

Here is an example of what a literature review could look like. This is an excerpt from the body of a literature review after the writer has already begun introducing the reader to relevant literature on a topic.

Another study by William Merrin (2007) states that Baudrillard has been incredibly misrepresented by his critics and often misunderstood by his admirers. Merrin (2007) **studies how** "Baudrillard believed television and other forms of advanced media eventually replace the sacred with the symbolic" (p. 81). Sacred at its simplest could be understood as the lived, physical experience with other humans which once characterized much of human interaction. The sacred has been replaced with the symbolic, which means that increasingly humans "communicate to each other via mediated screens in which true back-and-forth give-and-take exchange is replaced by one-sided information consumption" (Merrin, 2007, p. 111). Merrin (2007) **concludes that the evidence shows** that hyperreality ensues in which simulated symbolic exchange replaces pre-modern and modern forms of human interaction in creating a world that is more real than the real.

An article written by Gaffney and Bulfin (2017) **argues** that television and social media create a false sense of community. The argument goes that media-driven pseudo-events and images of experience fill our lives and give us collective shared "experience", when in fact these "experiences" are artificial creations that have no basis in reality (Gaffney & Bulfin, 2017). Once an event is mediated via the screen, it loses all relationship with reality because it has been packaged and presented to form a very specific narrative that goes unchallenged and accepted as what "really" happened. The authors use Baudrillard's work regarding the First Persian Gulf War as an example of an event that everyone watched but one where no one can definitively prove what actually happened. Gaffney and Bulfin (2017) **ultimately argue that the evidence shows** that because the First Persian Gulf War was the first fully televised war that the narrative about what happened was already pro-duced, edited, and cut for Western consumption before the war was even over. **The study finds** that true historical understanding "needs to be grounded in human experience that isn't soaked through with media information-as-definitive-truth so as to not further blur an already indistinguishable line between simulation and reality" (Gaffney & Bulfin, 2017, p. 214).

Notice the Signal Phrases in the Literature Review

- "**Another study** by *Author (Year)* states…" and "This *Author (Year)* **studies how**…"
- "*Author* **concludes that the evidence shows**…"
- "An article written by *Author* (*Year*) **argues**" and "The *Authors (Year)* ultimately argue that **the evidence shows**…"
- "**The study finds**…"
- A literature review uses wording that frames a text's purpose, its evidence, and its conclusions.

Here is a helpful chart to outline your writing process

The multiple purposes of your literature review:

My Research Topic		
Research Questions		
The purpose of the literature review	**Relevant points to include in relation to your own research topic**	**Key references**
Historical background		
Contemporary context		
Theories and concepts		
Relevant terminology		
Previous research and its limitations (the gap)		
The significance of the Issue being researched		
Other		

Further Assistance: This resource is available at lewisuwritingcenter.wordpress.com. For more detailed help or if you have questions, visit the Writing Center located in the Lewis University Library, or call 815-836-5427.

Sources Consulted: Northwestern University Center for the Writing Arts. NUWrite: A Collection of Writing Resources, Northwestern University, The Writing Place. Writing Place Resources, Literature Review Example. Ithaca College Library.