



Writing Literature Reviews

What is a literature review?

A literature review surveys scholarly articles, books and other sources relevant to a particular issue, area of research, or theory. It provides a description, summary, and critical evaluation of each work. The purpose is to offer an overview of significant literature published on a topic.

How is a literature review different from an annotated bibliography?

An annotated bibliography is a list of your references with a summary of the content and the publication's relationship to your research question. A literature review is an overview of the topic, an explanation of how publications differ from one another, and an examination of how each publication contributes to the discussion and understanding of the topic.

How do I write a literature review?

The general structure of your literature review as a whole should include:

- **Introduction:** Gives a quick idea of the topic of the literature review, such as the central theme or organizational pattern.
- **Body:** Contains your discussion of sources and is organized either chronologically, thematically, or methodologically.
- **Conclusions/Recommendations:** Discuss what you have drawn from reviewing literature so far. What are the conclusions drawn/trends noted by the authors writing on your chosen topic? What is their reasoning or evidence for those conclusions? Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Step 1

Find your focus. A literature review is organized around ideas, not the sources themselves as an annotated bibliography would be. This means that you shouldn't simply list your sources and go into detail about each of them, one at a time. Instead, read widely but selectively in your topic area and consider what themes or issues connect your chosen sources together.

Ask yourself some of these 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 or debate in the field?

Step 2

Once you have a focus, the organization of your sources can be selected. Gather your sources together and, with your specific topic in mind, consider which order would be best to discuss and prove the point your paper is focused around:

- **Chronological:** If your review follows the chronological method, you could write about the materials according to when they were published. This removes continuity among subjects and allows you to explore topics as they develop or change over time.
 - **By publication:** Order your sources based on the date in which they were published. This is a good organization method to use if the progression revealed a change in practices of the researchers who wrote and/or conducted the studies, or if you wish to look at a historical overview/contextualization of a topic.
 - **By trend:** Another way to organize chronological sources is to examine the sources under a common trend. Your review would then have subsections according to eras within this period. For instance, the review might examine biblical interpretations from pre-1600-1699, 1700-1799, and 1800-1899 and examine sociohistorical impacts on studies within each era.
- **Thematic:** Thematic reviews of literature are organized around a topic or issue, rather than the progression of time. However, progression of time may still be an important factor in a thematic review. While the study focuses on one topic, it will still be organized chronologically. The only difference here between a “chronological” and a “thematic” approach is what is emphasized the most: the chronological trend or the theme. However, thematic reviews can also to break away from chronological order. For instance, a thematic review of material on the Old Testament might examine how particular figures are portrayed as “evil” in cultural documents. The subsections might include how they are described, and how their behaviors are exaggerated or misunderstood. A review organized in this manner would shift between time periods within each section according to the point made.
- **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. One example of a methodological approach would be to look at cultural differences between the portrayal of a biblical scene in American, British, and French art work. Or the review might focus on the social influence or impact of biblical interpretations throughout history. A methodological scope will influence either the types of documents in the review or the way in which these documents are discussed.

Step 3

Structure your paper and begin writing. The body of your review should arise out of your organizational strategy. In other words, a chronological review would have subsections for each vital time period. A thematic review would have subtopics based upon factors that relate to the theme or issue. Create an outline to help keep you focused while exploring your sources and as you navigate the writing process.

Remember to summarize and synthesize your sources within each paragraph as well as throughout the review. Use your voice and offer your own opinions and analysis.

Find additional information in the sources used to create this guide:

[University of North Carolina](#), [Ashford University](#), and University of California [Santa Cruz](#).

Need more assistance or have any questions?

Call the library at 732-247-5243

or email Sage.Library@nbts.edu