

Writing a Literature Review

1. What is a literature review?

The word “literature review” can refer to two related things that are part of the broader literature review process. The first is the task of **reviewing the literature** – i.e., sourcing and reading through the existing research relating to your research topic. The second is the **actual chapter** that you write up in your dissertation, thesis, or research project.

a. Reviewing the literature

The first step of any literature review is to hunt down and read through the existing research that’s relevant to your research topic. To do this, you’ll use a combination of tools to find journal articles, books, ebooks, research reports, dissertations, theses, and any other credible sources of information that relate to your topic. You’ll then summarise and catalogue these for easy reference when you write up your literature review chapter.

b. The literature review chapter

The second step of the literature review is to write the actual literature review chapter. At the simplest level, the literature review chapter is an **overview of the key literature** that’s relevant to your research topic. This chapter should provide a smooth-flowing discussion of what research has already been done, what is known, what is unknown, and what is contested in relation to your research topic. So, you can think of it as an **integrated review of the state of knowledge** around your research topic.

2. What is the purpose of a literature review?

The literature review chapter has a few important functions within your dissertation, thesis, or research project.

Purpose #1 – Demonstrate your topic knowledge

The first function of the literature review chapter is, quite simply, to show the reader (or marker) that you **know what you’re talking about**. In other words, a good literature review chapter demonstrates that you’ve read the relevant existing research and understand what’s going on – who said what, what is agreed upon, disagreed upon, and so on. This needs to be **more than just a summary** of who said what – it needs to integrate the existing research to **show how it all fits together** and what’s missing.

Purpose #2 – Reveal the research gap that you’ll fill

The second function of the literature review chapter is to **show what’s currently missing** from the existing research, to lay the foundation for your research topic. In other words, your literature review chapter needs to show that there are currently “missing pieces” in terms of the bigger puzzle, and that **your study will fill one of those research gaps**. By doing this, you are showing that your research topic is original and will help contribute to the body of knowledge. In other words, the literature review helps justify your research topic.

Purpose #3 – Lay the foundation for your conceptual framework

The third function of the literature review is to form the **basis for a conceptual framework**. Not every research topic will necessarily have a conceptual framework, but if your topic does require one, it needs to be rooted in your literature review.

For example, let’s say your research aims to identify the drivers of a certain outcome – the factors which contribute to burnout in office workers. In this case, you’d likely develop a conceptual framework which details the potential factors (e.g., long hours, excessive stress, etc), as well as the outcome (burnout). Those factors would need to emerge from the literature review chapter.

So, in this case, the literature review chapter would uncover each of the potential factors (based on previous studies about burnout), which would then be modelled into a framework.

Purpose #4 – To inform your methodology

The fourth function of the literature review is to **inform the choice of methodology** for your research. Your choice of methodology will be heavily influenced by your research aims, objectives, and questions. Given that you’ll be reviewing studies covering a topic close to yours, it makes sense that you could learn a lot from their (well-considered) methodologies.

So, when you're reviewing the literature, you'll need to **pay close attention to the research design, methodology, and methods used in similar studies, and use these to inform your methodology.** Quite often, you'll be able to **"borrow" from previous studies.** This is especially true for quantitative studies, as you can use previously tried and tested measures and scales.

3. How do I find articles for my literature review?

Finding quality journal articles is essential to crafting a rock-solid literature review. As you probably already know, not all research is created equally, and so you need to make sure that your literature review is **built on credible research.**

a. Google Scholar

Google Scholar is essentially the academic equivalent of Google, using Google's powerful search capabilities to find relevant journal articles and reports. It certainly doesn't cover every possible resource, but it's a very useful way to get started on your literature review journey, as it will very quickly give you a good indication of what the **most popular pieces of research** are in your field.

One downside of Google Scholar is that it's merely a search engine – that is, it lists the articles, but oftentimes **it doesn't host the articles.**

b. ResearchGate

Research Gate is another great source for existing research. Remember, the correct search keywords will be super important to get the right information from the start. So, pay close attention to the keywords used in the journal articles you read and use those keywords to search for more articles.

One last tip – it's important that you **read recent sources.** Things change quickly in the world of research, and you want up-to-date information to support your literature. That's not to say that the classics are irrelevant – but you need to make sure they're up-to-date. It's no use citing a piece of research that was very popular but was subsequently found to have flawed results. Thankfully, within Google Scholar, you can filter results to a specific date range, so make use of this to ensure you **keep your reading up-to-date.**

4. How should I structure my literature review?

Unfortunately, there's no generic universal answer for this one. The structure of your literature review will **depend largely on your topic** area and your research aims and objectives. You could potentially structure your literature review chapter according to theme, group, variables, chronologically, or by concepts in your field of research. In general, it's also a good idea to start wide (i.e., the big-picture-level) and then narrow down, ending your literature review close to your research questions. However, there's no universal one "right way" to structure your literature review. The most important thing is not to discuss your sources one after the other; your literature review **needs to synthesize the research, not summarize it.** Ultimately, you need to craft your literature review so that it conveys the most important information effectively – it needs to tell a logical story in a digestible way. It's no use starting with highly technical terms and then only explaining what these terms mean later. Always assume your reader is not a subject matter expert and **hold their hand through a journey** of the literature while keeping the functions of the literature review chapter front of mind.

However, like any other chapter in your thesis or dissertation, your literature review needs to have a clear, logical structure. At a minimum, it should have three essential components – an **introduction**, a **body**, and a **conclusion**.

a. The Introduction Section

The introduction section of your literature review should introduce **the purpose and layout** (organization) of the chapter. In other words, your introduction needs to give the reader a taste of what's to come and how you're going to lay that out. Essentially, you should provide the reader with a high-level roadmap of your chapter to give them a taste of the journey that lies ahead. Your introduction should also **outline your topic** (including any tricky terminology or jargon) and provide an explanation of **the scope of your literature review** – in other words, what you **will** and **won't** be covering (the delimitations). This helps achieve a **clear focus**. The clearer and narrower your focus, the **deeper** you can dive into the topic.

Depending on the nature of your project, you could also present **your stance or point of view** at this stage. In other words, after grappling with the literature, you'll have an opinion about what the trends and concerns are in the field as well as what's lacking. The introduction section can then present these ideas so that it is clear to examiners that you're aware of how your **research connects with existing knowledge**.

b. The Body Section

The body of your literature review is the center of your work. This is where you'll **present, analyze, evaluate, and synthesize** the existing research. In other words, this is where you're going to earn (or lose) the most marks. Therefore, it's important to carefully think about how you will organize your discussion to present it clearly. The body of your literature review should do just as the description of this chapter suggests. It should "review" the literature – in other words, identify, analyze, and synthesize it. So, when thinking about structuring your literature review, you need to think about which structural approach will provide the best "review" for your specific type of research and objectives.

5. Organizing the Literature Review

Option 1: Chronological (according to date)

Organizing the literature chronologically is one of the **simplest ways** to structure your literature review. You start with what was published first and work your way through the literature until you reach the work published most recently.

The benefit of this option is that it makes it **easy to discuss the developments** and debates in the field as they emerged over time. Organizing your literature chronologically also allows you to highlight how specific articles or pieces of work might have changed the course of the field – in other words, which research has had **the most impact**. Therefore, this approach is very useful when your research is aimed at understanding how the topic has unfolded over time and is often used by scholars in the field of history. That said, this approach can be utilized by anyone who wants to **explore change over time**.

Here are some **questions you can ask yourself** to help you organize your literature review chronologically.

- What is the earliest literature published relating to this topic?
- How has the field changed over time? Why?
- What are the most recent discoveries/theories?
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In some ways, chronology plays a part whichever way you decide to structure your literature review, because you will always, to a certain extent, be analyzing how the literature has developed. However, with the chronological approach, the emphasis is very firmly on **how the discussion has evolved over time**, as opposed to how all the literature links together.

Option 2: Thematic (grouped by theme)

The thematic approach to structuring a literature review means organizing your literature by **theme or category** – for example, by **independent variables** (i.e., factors that have an impact on a specific outcome). As you've been collecting and **synthesising literature**, you'll likely have started seeing some themes or patterns emerging. You can then use these **themes or patterns as a structure** for your body discussion. The thematic approach is the most common and is useful for structuring literature reviews in most fields. Structuring your literature review thematically would mean structuring your literature review's body section to discuss each of these themes, one section at a time.

Here are some **questions to ask yourself** when structuring your literature review by themes:

- Are there any patterns that have come to light in the literature?
- What are the central themes and categories used by the researchers?
- Do I have enough evidence of these themes?

Option 3: Methodological

The methodological option is a way of organizing your literature review by the **research methodologies used**. In other words, organizing your discussion based on the angle from which each piece of research was approached, for example, **qualitative, quantitative**, or **mixed** methodologies.

Structuring your literature review by methodology can be useful if you are drawing research from a variety of disciplines and are critiquing different methodologies. The point of this approach is to question **how** existing research has been conducted, as opposed to **what** the conclusions and/or findings of the research were.

Here are some **questions you can ask yourself** when structuring your literature review according to methodology:

- Which methodologies have been utilized in this field?
- Which methodology is the most popular (and why)?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the various methodologies?
- How can the existing methodologies inform my methodology?

c. The Conclusion Section

Once you've completed the body section of your literature review using one of the structural approaches discussed above, you'll need to "wrap up" your literature review and **pull all the pieces together** to set the direction for the rest of your dissertation or thesis.

The conclusion is where you will **present the key findings** of your literature review. In this section, you should emphasize the research that is especially important to your [research questions](#) and **highlight the gaps** that exist in the literature. Based on this, you need to make it clear **what you will add** to the literature – in other words, justify your own research by showing how it will help fill one or more of the gaps you just identified.

Last but not least, if you intend to develop a **conceptual framework** for your dissertation or thesis, the conclusion section is a good place to present this.

Key Takeaways

1. Just like other chapters, your literature review needs a clear **introduction, body, and conclusion**.
2. The introduction section should provide an **overview** of what you will discuss in your literature review.
3. The body section of your literature review can be organized by **chronology, theme, or methodology**. The right structural approach depends on what you're trying to achieve with your research.
4. The conclusion section should **draw together the key findings** of your literature review and link them to your research questions.