Literature Review

Aim of this factsheet
To help students to understand what a literature review is and break the work down into achievable tasks.

What is a literature review?
A critical assessment of a wide range of published work on a specific academic topic.
It may be a standalone assignment or a specific section within a larger report or dissertation.

What is the purpose of a literature review?
To demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of current thinking directly linked to your assignment question or research topic. Depending on your subject discipline you will need to think about different laws, guidance, theories, practices, arguments, or approaches.

Oliver (2012) suggested that a literature review should:

- compare and contrast differing authors’ views
- include a critique of methodology used by authors
- show an understanding of the areas of agreement between authors
- show an understanding of the areas of disagreement between authors
- suggest gaps in research
- provide a conclusion summarising what the literature says.

It may be helpful to read an example literature review. The best way to do this is to access one of the University databases and use the advanced search to select Literature Review under the methodology option. You may wish to read your Subject Guide or speak to a Subject Librarian to help with this.

A literature review can be broken down into smaller, and therefore achievable, sections. This may be identified in your assignment information (see also tip 5 on page 4).

TIP Please ensure that you follow your assignment criteria which will help you to understand how the marks are allocated to each section of your work. This will help you to manage both your time and your word count.
Six steps to success

1. **Decide a topic and know the area you want to research**

If you have a choice, the **MOST** important task is to get your **title, aims and objectives decided and agreed by your tutor.**

You will find it difficult to search for relevant books/articles if you do not:

- a) Get a specific title
- b) Decide on your aims and objectives
- c) Know what you intend to achieve from doing this review
- d) Make a list of specific questions (sub topics) which you are trying to answer.

**TIP** Find a resource which gives an overview of your topic so that you can begin to appreciate the content and scale of the issue. At this stage you may choose to narrow your topic or pick only a sub topic. You should also start making a list of **key terms and phrases** which are fundamental to a successful literature search. It can also be useful to do a quick **mind map** which can help you to understand the **connections** between different sub topics.
2. **Search for a wide range of academic sources and decide what you need to read**

   You should include a combination of sources such as books, e-books, journals and e-journals. You also need to look at both original research and other literature reviews.

   However, you will not be able to read every single thing written about a subject so set yourself some constraints (**inclusion criteria**). For instance think about:

   a) Date published – you might restrict yourself to material which is less than 5 years old
   
   b) Country of origin – you may decide to look only at UK based research
   
   c) Academically verified websites – you may decide to only use Staffordshire University resources.
   
   d) You should refer to work which is peer reviewed and referenced
   
   e) Your list of key words and phrases
   
   f) Ensure that there is a direct link to your specific question /research.

   In your literature review you should state what constraints you used and cite where you got your information from. This allows the reader of your work to make a judgement about your sources of information.

   **TIP** Keep a note of the search terms and words you use in your searches and if in doubt book an **appointment** with your Subject Librarian.

3. **Find relevant sections** *(see Academic Reading resources for more details)*

   Now you have a selection of sources, probably in both physical and electronic format, you need to adopt skimming and scanning techniques in order to find the key sections which address the questions / sub topics which you have identified in 1(d). Make good use of highlighters and maybe think of a colour coding scheme (for example, green for question 1, blue for question 2).

   **TIP** – Many students find it useful at this stage to summarise all of the work they have found in table format. Using Excel is possibly the easiest. Headings should include author, date, title, source, methodology used, search criteria followed by any specific questions/areas for discussion. All reviews are different; if you need help with this stage please make an appointment to see one of the Academic Skills Tutors.

4. **Group into sub topics**

   ✓ **Organise the review in a logical way:** think about a paragraph for each sub topic or question. Present authors who come to similar conclusions together. Plan your work into a logical sequence.

   ✓ **Be critical:** both of the design and methodology of the authors’ work. Do highlight exemplary studies. Are there authors who you think are more scientific than others, more relevant to your objectives? Do some authors deserve more credence than others? Justify your comments.
5. **Finalise the structure**

Ensure that you follow your specific assessment criteria but below are some general suggestions:

- **Introduction:** this gives an outline of the review and a rationale for doing it.
- **Methodology (or inclusion/exclusion criteria):** what have you done to find published work? Why did you choose to read the work you did? Why did you reject some authors? Where did you look for information? Why?
- **Link your arguments** and the evidence uncovered in your reading (see section 3).
- **Gaps in research:** state if there are there any omissions. What do you think needs doing to fill the gap?
- **Conclusion:** after doing all the research what do you conclude? What is the current thinking? What is the summary of the current debate in your subject?

**REMEMBER:** in order to illustrate the depth of your research and to avoid plagiarism you must reference your sources at the point of discussion (in text citation) and include a bibliography/reference list. See the RefZone for more information.

6. **Write the review**

Literature reviews should be written in the 3rd person (see the Academic Language and Academic Writing resources for more information). You are stating what other people have discovered about a particular subject. Consequently, you will be including lots of citations in your work and have a substantial reference list. As a general rule, for every 1000 words written you should have 10 – 15 different references. Avoid too many direct quotations and ensure that you maintain neutrality by discussing all points of view.

**References**


**For an appointment or further advice:**

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