

WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW

What it is

A literature review conveys to your reader the existing knowledge and ideas published on your research topic by accredited scholars. It assesses the strengths and weaknesses of these texts/ experiments/studies. It is a classification of previous research on a specific topic that is critically evaluated and interpreted in order to build a coherent argument, which relates to the argument of your own research.

In sum, it is a conceptual map of the knowledge about a topic available in the public domain.

What it isn't

It should be a piece of discursive prose not just a descriptive list or a set of summaries, but an evaluation of the scholarship already produced that provides a context to your writing. It is therefore a bad sign to see every paragraph opening with the name of the researcher. Neither is it the objective to find as many works as possible- so avoid trying to read everything.

The skills it demonstrates

Information seeking; the ability to access the literature efficiently, using manual or computerised methods, to identify a set of useful articles or books

Critical appraisal: the ability to apply principles of analysis to identify fruitful, unbiased and valid studies.

Aims

- To identify how and why the gap you are filling may exist and the comparability of the other studies (which include works showing different points of view and areas of controversy). This distinguishes what has already been done in order to identify reasons for your work
- To identify significant landmark studies through a selection of key sources and authors
- To establish a context for your interest based on existing knowledge, relevant theory and the characteristics of and relationships between key concepts.

In sum, the literature review helps to establish the context, background, and justification for your study.

Organisation

- Your review can be organised in a variety of ways e.g .thematically, in terms of individual topic or a particular variable, historically, in an interdisciplinary way or through argument and counterargument.
- Most importantly your literature review should be clearly organised in response to your research (your aims, question or argument)

In sum, there is a need for critical analysis where the strengths and weaknesses of each source are discussed in relation to your aims, question or argument.