

Doing a Literature Review

Introduction

This video will help you with your literature review. It will go over the various steps involved, including researching, synthesizing, analyzing, and organizing your sources.

Purpose & Format of a Literature Review

Let's start off with what a lit review does. It puts your work into a scholarly framework. It outlines what has and hasn't already been studied by others, and outlines the key debates and perspectives in your area. Academic scholarship is an ongoing conversation, with different voices contributing to the discussion on a topic. Your lit review shows how your work fits into all the other voices in the conversation.

A literature review is not just a summary of what others have written. It analyzes the existing scholarship and pulls out the different themes and patterns found in it as they relate to your topic or question. The goal of your literature review is to justify your work by showing how it is different than what others have already done.

Process Involved

Step 1: Research Question

The first step is to come up with a specific topic to write on, or ideally to create a research question. The research question will guide your research and writing for your entire project, and help structure your lit review.

Step 2: Search for Sources

After you have a topic or question, you can search for relevant scholarship.

A lit review is usually expected to be fairly comprehensive, especially if you're a graduate student. You'll be expected to use the key sources in your area. That means you'll need to find and read a lot more sources than you use, so you can identify the key ones.

To find them, you'll need to search more systematically than you normally would. To search systematically, think about the best places to search. Consider carefully what search terms you use, and make sure you use the terms other people writing on your topic would use to refer to it.

Systematic searching is a process, so you'll need to do some searches, look at the results, and modify or search again multiple times. You'll likely find some search terms you weren't aware of initially, or find that some other search tool is better, or find other works in the bibliographies of things you're reading.

It's useful to keep track of what you've done as you search. To do this, you can create a tracking worksheet, listing things like where you searched, what terms you used and in which combination, and notes to yourself about any future modifications.

How do you know when you've found enough? This depends a lot on your topic. In general, though, you'll know you've found the key authors and works on the topic when you keep seeing them referred to in other people's bibliographies.

Step 3: Critical Reading

As we've seen, the searching and reading stages of a literature review overlap, since your reading will help you identify sources to search for. You'll want to be sure you read the relevant sources you find analytically and take good notes as you go.

The first thing to look for is the source's relationship to your research question. Only things that are directly relevant to your specific question are important.

As you're reading, you'll want to make sure you make notes on things like the main theory and method used by the researcher, the main findings and arguments. You'll also need to keep track of its strengths and weaknesses, and how it relates to other studies.

Step 4: Analysis & Synthesis

After you read and take notes, go back through your notes, and look for patterns or themes that emerge. These patterns could be anything, depending on the scholarship in your area. They could relate to what people have found, what they agree or disagree on, what they have researched and what they haven't, what theories and methods they have or haven't used, or how scholarship in your area has changed over time.

It's helpful to use a system for coding and organizing your notes into themes. One common strategy is to use sticky notes to write things on and move them around into groupings. Another strategy is to use a matrix or table to organize your themes. You can list the themes as columns, and your sources across the top as rows, and note where one of the sources fits one of the themes. Using some kind of method to organize first will make your lit review a lot easier to write.

Step 5: Organization & Writing

Once you've figured out what patterns there are to talk about, you can start organizing and writing your review.

Sometimes people ask about what the difference is between the literature review and the rest of their paper. Obviously, both involve critical reading, pulling out themes, and making arguments. Where the two differ is in their goals and purpose. Your paper puts forward your own thoughts and arguments, which are often supported by research that others have done. The literature review is there to justify your paper in the first place. It puts it in context, but its main goal is to show why your work is important and necessary. The whole focus of your literature review is to show what others have done on your topic, and to show that there is some kind of gap that your work is going to fill. Your lit review should convince your reader that your arguments are important to read.

Your lit review has a structure that's similar to your larger paper. You need an introduction, a body and a conclusion, with a main point and arguments. In the body you discuss the themes and patterns you found in the literature and point out any gaps or problems. Often in lit reviews the key relevance of several studies are summarized in one or a few sentences, but you'll want to go into more detail with a few of the studies that are most relevant. At the end, make sure that you bring everything back clearly to how it relates to your question. Ideally you'll be able to emphasize how there is a gap in the existing research, or a problem that your work will address.

Then, after this setup in your literature review, you'll be able to go ahead and address that gap or problem in the rest of your paper.

Questions

If you have any questions, ask us at library.wlu.ca/help/askus.