

# Writing a literature review

A literature review is usually written as part of a postgraduate thesis proposal or at the beginning of a dissertation or thesis. A literature review gives an overview of the area of study: **what** has already been said on the topic; **who** the key writers are; what the prevailing theories and hypotheses are; **what questions** are being asked; and **what methodologies** are appropriate and useful. In a literature review, you demonstrate that you have read and understood previous and current research in the area.

1. Format for a literature review
2. Steps for writing a literature review

## 1. Format for a literature review

A literature review follows an essay format (Introduction, Body, Conclusion), but if the literature itself is the topic of the essay, your essay will need to consider the literature in terms of the key topics/themes you are examining. **DO NOT confuse your essay format with an annotated bibliography which describes and evaluates individual texts.**

### Example plan

<b>Introduction</b>  Topic sentence that states the broad topic of your thesis Following sentence/s that state what is included/excluded (parameters) Final sentence/s that signals list of key topics that will be used to discuss the selected sources
<b>Body</b>  Divide up your text into sections/topics as indicated in the last sentence of your introduction. Each paragraph will be a synthesis of the many texts that you have chosen for your literature review.
<b>Conclusion</b>

NOTE: Do not confuse a literature review with an annotated bibliography

## 2. Steps for writing a literature review

### 1. Do a literature search

Find out what has been written about your topic. A good starting point is the list of references or bibliography of a recent article or book on the topic. Then use other bibliographical sources including abstracts, electronic data bases and the Internet. If you decide that a text is relevant, write down the bibliographical details in full—as the item would appear in your list of references or bibliography. If you use systems cards and write one item at the top of each card, you will save time later on. Personal bibliographic software such as EndNote, is an extremely useful tool for tracking reading, organising references and automatically generating reference lists.

### 2. Find the literature

First check whether the material is held at UNE. If it is not, your supervisor might be able to assist with some of the material, you may be able to spend some time working in a library which has more comprehensive holdings, or you might be able to use inter-library loans.

### **3. Read the literature**

Record the author and the title (you already have the other bibliographical information) and take notes. Your aim is to determine how the topic is approached and what is said about it. As you make notes, ask yourself the following questions about each text.

- What sort of text is it?
- What is the methodology?
- Is a particular approach or school followed?
- What are the definitions used?
- What is the theoretical basis?
- What evidence is used to back up the thesis?
- What are the conclusions?

### **4. Write short summaries**

For each relevant text, try to write a one paragraph summary similar to an abstract.

### **5. Organise the summaries**

Try to identify similarities and group the summaries accordingly. The headings under which the summaries are grouped will vary, depending on the topic and the subject.

### **6. Write each section**

Each section of your literature review should deal with a specific aspect of the literature.

### **7. Decide on the order of presentation**

In most cases, this would be from most important to least important, or from established to more controversial theories.

### **8. Write the conclusion**

The conclusion should include a summary of major agreements and disagreements in the literature and a summary of the general conclusions drawn. If the literature review is part of a dissertation or thesis, you should also indicate your own area of research. This might involve identifying a gap in the previous research, identifying problems with the previous research or proposing to extend previous knowledge.

### **9. Write the introduction**

The introduction should include a clear statement of the topic and its parameters. You should indicate why the research area is important, interesting, problematic or relevant in some way.

### **10. Proofread and edit carefully**

The literature review is an important part of a dissertation or thesis. It should be thorough and accurate.

**Topic sentence – identifies five major themes as the scope of this review**

Many theories have been proposed to explain what motivates human behaviour. **Although the literature covers a wide variety of such theories, this review will focus on five major themes which emerge repeatedly throughout the literature reviewed.** These themes are: incorporation of the **self-concept** into traditional theories of motivation, the influence of **rewards** on motivation, the increasing importance of **internal forces** of motivation, **autonomy and self-control** as sources of motivation, and **narcissism** as an essential component of motivation. **Although the literature presents these themes in a variety of contexts, this paper will primarily focus on their application to self-motivation.**

**5 major themes to be covered**

**Concluding sentence – specific focus**