Writing A Literature Review

What Is It?

A literature review is an evaluative report of information found in the literature related to an area of study. Unlike a general research paper, literature reviews are much more concise and pointed in the approach to the research.

Goal. The goal of the literature review is to lead up to the study itself by presenting what other research shows regarding the topic. What is important to understand is, in the Social Sciences particularly, research conclusions are never strong in themselves. The strength of data comes with replication of the same or similar results across various research studies. Having said that, the literature review seeks to find research and literature related to the topic of interest.

Variables, Factor, and Themes. Furthermore, these types of articles seek to conceptualize a relationship between two or more variables or factors. For example, one could investigate the relationship between job satisfaction and rates of depression. The goal of the literature review is to identify research that has already shown the nature of this relationship. What has the research said about this relationship? Does one variable increase or decrease the other / how do they affect one another?

What Does It Do?

A literature review differs in a few ways from the way general research papers are approached:

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<thead>
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<th>A literature review does...</th>
<th>A literature review does not...</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Seeks to explore a relationship between different variables or factors</td>
<td>• Seek to prove an argument for one position or another</td>
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<td>• Uses patterns in the research to show the above relationship</td>
<td>• Include description or narrative detail</td>
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<td>• Synthesizes the body of existing research</td>
<td>• Summarize sources one at a time; give lengthy descriptions or explanations of any one study</td>
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<td>• Remains objective in style</td>
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In looking at the “does not,” column, it is interesting to see that many of the approaches we are taught to take in composition classes do not apply to a literature review! In many ways, this makes the approach to the literature review almost counter-intuitive for many students. It is a very different approach to the writing.
What Do I Do?

There are several steps you can take to help move along the process of writing a lit review:

1. **Know your research question.** The research question serves as a sort of thesis for a literature review. The research question is that specific question that guides your research and writing. In your research question, you should have, in your mind, a relationship of variables that you will be supporting. When this is not clear, it can become very difficult to come up with the points for your lit review!

   Example Research Question: *How does objectification of women in music videos affect the self-esteem of women?*

   Notice there are two “themes” or “variables” stated, and the rest of the paper will focus on showing the relationship between those variables (i.e., how objectification either raises or decreases self-esteem).

2. **Review the literature strategically.** When reading the literature, have a strategy for approaching it. Become familiar with the sections that are usually in journal articles, and the order in which the information is presented so that you get used to reading these kinds of documents.

   One suggested strategy is to read the first part of the article lightly (for background on the research) and spend most of your time understanding the conclusion. Remember that every article has a lit review at the beginning – which means that will be just a synthesis of other literature! You want to focus on the conclusions the researcher has drawn to help support your point.

   **Tip #1:** A source can also be your ticket to finding other sources! Remember that the researchers have to cite where they got their information from too – so you can even look at their literature review and, if you see some info you could use, take a look at their reference list and see if you can find that source.

   **Tip #2:** Also, while reading the research, take note of the style of writing. You will want to mimic this style when writing your own literature review.

3. **Synthesize, don't summarize!** One important detail to remember is to avoid summarizing each of your sources. If you find yourself saying "In this study, this happened" for each source, you are not doing a literature review! Summarizing each source actually becomes more like an annotated bibliography than a lit review.

   To avoid this, use the “by point, not source” method. Remember that the paper should not be a list of summaries of articles. Instead, identify different points in your topic and research question, and then figure out which sources can support that point. You can also do the reverse by noting similarities across the research and drawing points from those patterns.