

Literature Review



A literature review can either introduce your own research, explaining where your work will fit into the larger context of related research, or it can be a stand-alone piece that functions as an introduction to a larger scholarly conversation. A literature review synthesizes existing research and makes a claim about the state of the scholarly conversation. Literature reviews differ based on the assignment, genre, or discipline. Because this handout provides only general principles, always tailor your work to your audience and assignment.

Purpose of a Literature Review

The purpose of a literature review is to **examine and synthesize current literature written on a specific topic**. Prior to writing a literature review, read widely on your topic. After you have a good idea of what the literature says, examine big-picture connections among the sources and organize them according to similarities and differences. Show these relationships when you write your review and connect them to larger ideas within the discipline. At the end of your review, point out gaps in the research and suggest a direction for future studies.

Synthesize the Research and Identifying Themes

The goal of a literature review is to connect the research from the original sources into one cohesive contextual analysis. **Once you have reviewed the research, ask yourself** the following questions:

- What theoretical perspectives, methodologies, themes, or outcomes have I noticed in the research I have read? What are the trends?
- How do individual studies or sources confirm or dispute others' findings? How can I group the research?
- What are the limitations of previous studies? Where are the gaps in the research?
- What are the implications of these studies? What are the areas that need further research?

Organize the Literature Review

Introduction

Identify the topic of your literature review and provide context.

Example: "Hospital nurses commonly work shifts that last either 8 or 12 hours."

Present the overarching themes you identified in your research and how you will discuss them.

Example: "Many nurses prefer working 12 hour shifts, so they can reduce their number of workdays per week. However, some healthcare professionals worry that the costs of working such long hours could outweigh the benefits."

Create a guiding thesis statement or agenda to function as a roadmap for your paper.

Example: "Current studies reveal that although most nurses prefer 12-hour shifts, the nurses who work 12-hour shifts experience more fatigue, have worse overall health, and have more work-related accidents than the nurses who work 8-hour shifts, but further research investigating the effect on the quality of patient care is necessary."

Body Sections

Use patterns or themes from the research to **organize your text into sections**. Keep in mind that sections within a literature review vary by assignment or research field. Refer to your assignment guidelines or literature review examples within your field to decide which sections to include.

Example: Based on the previously mentioned thesis statement, the literature review would include sections on preferred hours, fatigue, overall health, work-related accidents, and quality of care.

Remember that a literature review synthesizes research. Literature reviews explain overarching themes instead of listing sources one at a time.

Example: For the preferred hours section, if you found nine sources that say nurses prefer 12-hour shifts and two that say nurses prefer 8-hour shifts, you could note that nurses prefer 12-hour shifts, although there are some exceptions.

Write the section. Begin with a topic sentence that makes conceptual connections. Synthesize the studies based on overall trends. Then conclude your observations with the implications of your findings.

<p>In the last few years, prompted largely by the work of Brown and Roberts (1997), numerous articles on the effects of 12-hour shifts on nurses have appeared in various medical journals. Since this issue applies to the majority of nurses, most experts on the subject have urged that new studies focus on how overworking decreases the quality of patient care and how hospital administrations can approach that pressing problem by phasing out 12-hour shifts (Williams & Jones, 1972; Cooper & Green, 1980; Hill, 1997). However, as pointed out by Wilson et al. (2001), the Canadian health care system offers some unique perspectives on the potential benefits of 12-hour shifts: Since the 12-hour shift is optional in some provinces of Canada (such as Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia), nurses there have the freedom to choose the schedule best for their lifestyle, allowing both nurses and patients to reap the benefits of either shift option. To date, only one study (Young et al., 1991) has investigated the effects of the Canadian system on its nurses using a pooled data set extending across eight years (1977 to 1984) and three provinces, leaving room for additional research.</p>	<p>Use a topic sentence to establish the overarching theme and paragraph focus.</p> <p>Point out important similarities between articles.</p> <p>Point out dissenting voices in the research.</p> <p>Explain how the different voices contribute to the current understanding.</p> <p>Draw conclusions based on the conversation and show how they fit in the big picture.</p>
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Conclusion

Summarize the current state of the literature. Where is the field currently in its research? What trends exist?

Example: “While studies continue to explore the costs and benefits of long nursing shifts, the majority of current research shows that 8-hour nursing shifts are safer than 12-hour nursing shifts for both the patient and the nurse.”

Identify the gaps and make room for additional research. Discuss implications and limitations of the research you studied. What topics have not been addressed? What is missing from the research or current conversation? In the conclusion of a literature review, explain why there is room for your own research or what new directions the research could take. How will this future research fill in the research gap?