Literature reviews

Why should I write a literature review?

In **professional settings**, you may be asked to review what other people have written about something, for example: a product, a company, a practice or way of doing things, or an issue or problem.

> **Note**: This guide is about **undergraduate** level **analytical literature reviews**. For other types of literature reviews, ask your supervisor or tutor for further guidance.
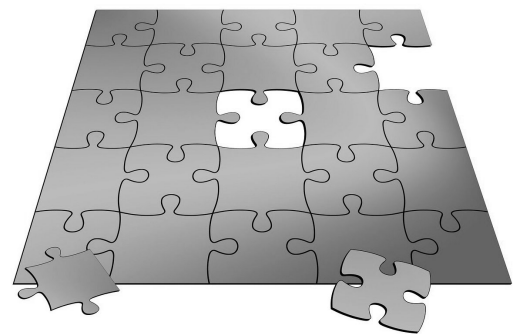
You'll need to be able to **analyse** and **evaluate** what other people have done before and written about, and **make recommendations** based on what you have read.

Writing a literature review **at uni** helps you learn how to:

- **Analyse and evaluate** what other people write

- **Make recommendations** for practice based on the information you find

- **Identify** areas people might need to investigate more in future

If you conduct a **research project** and write a research report, you need to do a literature review:

→ to show the areas of your topic that should be researched further – often called the **research 'gap'**

→ to show how your research helps fill some of the research gaps.

Reviewing the literature will also help you **build your knowledge** in your field of study. You'll learn about important concepts, research methods, and experimental techniques that are used in your field. You'll also gain insight into how researchers apply the concepts you're learning in your unit to real world problems.

What's a literature review?

A literature review is where you read and analyse one or more pieces of scholarly literature (e.g. journal article, book, book chapter) to get a better understanding of the research and debates relevant to a particular topic or area of study. You then write about what you have read in the form of a written report (or sometimes an essay).

A literature review involves:

1. finding scholarly literature on the topic
2. reading and taking notes
3. analysing or evaluating the literature
4. writing the literature review

> Tip: For more information and tips for these steps, read the Literature review process guide.

Useful terms

Literature	A scholarly publication such as a journal article, book chapter, book, or conference paper.
Research	(a) The process of investigating a question or problem using scholarly or scientific methods. (b) The writing published as an output of scholarly research (also referred to as literature).
Research gap	Specific areas of a topic that should be researched further.

What's in a literature review?

The structure of a literature review can vary, but it usually needs:

→ an **introduction** that outlines the topic and scope of your review,
→ a **body** where you organise your analysis of the literature according to the most important points or themes you identify; and
→ a **conclusion**, where you summarise what you found in your literature review and any recommendations you want to make as a result of it.

Depending on the discipline, purpose and context of your literature review, you may be asked to use the structure of a report or an essay – check your assignment instructions. Also check whether you are asked to use particular headings to organise your review.

Before you start writing

You actually need to do more than half the work of a literature review **before** you start writing. The diagram below shows the important steps you need to take before you can start writing your literature review.

Step	What to do	Questions to ask	Links to useful resources
1. Define and clarify topic	Define: identify key words Clarify: rewrite the topic in your own words	What is the general topic? What else do I know about this topic? (mind map)	Getting started by finding information
2. Find relevant literature	Identify search terms Look for journals and books	What sources address the topic? Does each source have scholarly APPEAL?	Getting started by finding information Evaluating sources using APPEAL
3. Read the literature	Organise the ideas you find by taking notes	What are the main ideas?	Researching and reading online guide
4. Analyse the literature	Make connections between the ideas	How are the ideas connected/similar/different? What is the evidence for the claims they make?	Researching and reading online guide
5. Plan your writing	Decide which order to present your main points about the literature	What are the main points I need to make? What sequence is best?	Essay drafting tool

Adapted from "Psychology: Human Behaviour, Week 4 lecture slides", by K. Tremayne & S. Vicary, 2017 (https://vuws.westernsydney.edu.au). Adapted with permission.

Tip: Use the Assignment Calculator to plan your time. Select the 'Essay' type for a step-by-step timeline.

Dos and Don'ts of Literature Reviews

✔	✘
→ analyse each source by comparing and contrasting them to other literature on the topic	→ don't just summarise or describe each source
→ show how each source contributes to the picture you have built up about the topic	→ don't a paragraph on each source; instead organise common ideas from different sources into a paragraph
→ organise your writing around common ideas you identify in the literature	

Example of an Analytics Review

The following paragraph is adapted from the literature review section of a student's research report in social psychology. The topic was how gender relates to openness, emotional support, and dishonesty in online chat rooms. This paragraph focuses on one aspect of the question: how people interact in relation to gender norms in computer mediated communication (CMC).

Writing about the literature

The example focuses on the literature and analyses what it says about the topic. We can see this from the way many of the sentences begin with *research-related words* followed by **reporting verbs**:

→ *Research on CMC* **highlights**…
→ *Whitty and Gavin (2000)* **found**…
→ *Lea and Spears (1995)* **found**…
→ while *Cooper and Sportolari (1997)* **found**…

The **topic of gender in CMC interactions** is established.

The writer summarises specific examples of research findings about how men interact in CMC that are different from in face-to-face communication, citing the relevant sources.

The writer summarises the implications of the findings, citing some of the key sources.

In computer mediated communication (CMC), people are less constrained by their gender than in face to face (FTF) interactions. Research on CMC highlights how CMC enables individuals to break out from traditional gender roles in relating to others, and experiment with other ways of interacting (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Lea & Spears, 1995; Parks & Roberts, 1998; Whitty & Gavin, 2000). Whitty and Gavin (2000) found that for men, CMC gave them an opportunity to relate emotionally and receive support (Whitty & Gavin, 2000). Lea and Spears (1995) found that women sometimes adopted neutral or male identities to relate to males with greater equality, while Cooper and Sportolari (1997) found that CMC allowed women to experiment with their sexuality in a safe, anonymous environment. CMC gives both sexes an opportunity to build relationships that are based on factors other than physical attractiveness (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Lea & Spears, 1995), an opportunity especially important to women, for whom physical appearance is traditionally a defining feature (Wood, 1997).

The writer summarises the main research findings about the topic, citing relevant sources at the end of the summary.

The writer summarises specific examples of research findings about how women interact in CMC that are different from in face-to-face communication, citing the relevant sources.

Adapted from "What is the relationship of gender to openness, emotional support, and dishonesty in chat rooms?" by Western Sydney University student FLW, n.d. (personal communication).

Comparing, contrasting, and analysing the literature

When you read the literature, use a note-taking system to organise the information you find. You could use a table like the one below, or a mind map or other technique that allows you to compare sources easily.

This table contains notes from the literature on gender in CMC discussed in the example paragraph above.

Literature on gender in computer mediated communication (CMC)

Source	Focus of research	Key findings
Cooper & Sportolari (1997)	Women in CMC	CMC is safe and anonymous, allowing women to experiment with their sexuality. Women build relationships in CMC not based on physical attractiveness.
Lea & Spears (1995)	Women in CMC	Women build relationships in CMC based on non-physical attributes.
Parks & Roberts (1998)	Relationship building in CMC	Men and women relate to others differently in CMC than in FTF interactions.
Whitty & Gavin (2000)	Men in CMC	Men relate emotionally & receive support in CMC.
Wood (1997)	Women	Physical appearance is traditionally a defining feature for women.

Common problems

→ Difficulty finding relevant literature - the Successful Searching Tutorials on the Study Smart Website will help you start your search well.

→ Too much to read - rather than reading all the sources in depth, survey them first to check if they are relevant to your literature review topic. Work through the short interactive tutorial on Pre-reading techniques on the Study Smart Website.

→ Literature that is not scholarly enough - watch the Library video on evaluating sources using APPEAL (video, 6:26) and use the APPEAL evaluation worksheet (PDF, 268 kB) as you read the sources.

→ Not evaluating the sources – use the Critical thinking guide and the Note-making for critical thinking worksheet to help you question the literature as you read it.

→ Informal/inappropriate tone – read the Essay tone or Report tone guides.