1.04 How to Write a Literature Review

What is a literature review?

A literature review is not just a sequence of summaries or critiques of selected sources (this is known as an annotated bibliography). Rather, it should take the form of a **critical discussion, showing insight and an awareness of differing arguments, theories, methods and findings**. It should analyse and synthesise relevant published works.

The aim of a literature review is to **provide your reader with the resources to understand and evaluate the most important published work concerning your chosen topic or research question**. It may be a separate document, or it may provide a background for a longer document, such as a report or dissertation, often coming after the introduction and before the methodology. In a systematic review or a desk study, however, a literature review makes up the main body of the document and is often preceded by a methodology.

A good literature review is (objectively) critical of what has been written, identifies areas of controversy, raises questions and identifies areas which need further research.

Structure of a literature review

Literature reviews should start with an **introduction**. You should aim to initially **capture your reader's interest**, starting from a **general context**, then **establish the subject and scope** of the review, then **outline the structure** of the main body of the review.

The review should then continue with a **main body**. This is often structured in **themes**, with each addressing a subject **broader** than that of the study but relevant to it. Alternatively, you could adopt a **chronological** structure, or present and discuss literature within themes chronologically. It is often required to **include theory** within these themes. One approach is to select a theory (or theories) for each theme and to provide a rationale for your choice(s). Alternatively, you could identify and evaluate the theories used by the studies you have selected to include within a theme. Another approach is to start your main body with a discussion of relevant theories then apply your framework (your evaluation of these theories, or your chosen theory or theories) to the rest of the main body.

Longer reviews may then include a section which addresses the **specific topic** of your study, focusing on the literature most specific to this area (these sources should also inform your choice of methodology if you are doing primary data collection and analysis).

The review should end with a **discussion** or **conclusion**, which summarises the findings in the main body, identifies gaps in the literature, raises questions, and evaluates how well you have achieved the purpose of your review as set out in the introduction.

Researching your review

The selection of sources for a review involves **critical thinking**. It is important to be **systematic** in your approach. If you are carrying out a systematic review or desk study you will need to explain the way you have done this in your methodology. The sources you cite may be in any format, but **high quality**, **peer reviewed** sources should be emphasised.

You need to start by establishing **what** your review is about and **how broad** a scope you are going to address. There may be specific journals or databases you can search with keywords, or there may be highly regarded publications in your field from which other sources can be identified (e.g. using the "Cited by" link in Google Scholar). It is important to emphasise **recent developments** in the field (such as articles published in targeted journals in the last 10 years) whilst still including significant historical sources.

Once you have identified some relevant sources you should be able to identify **initial themes** for your review, which should then enable you to search for literature in a more focused way. Themes may need to split into subthemes in longer reviews.

A useful technique at this stage is to **draw a mind map** of your chosen subject and attach Post-it notes to the map which represent individual sources. This will enable you to assess how well you have covered different areas of your map, improve your choice of themes and identify additional links between concepts – see Figure 1.

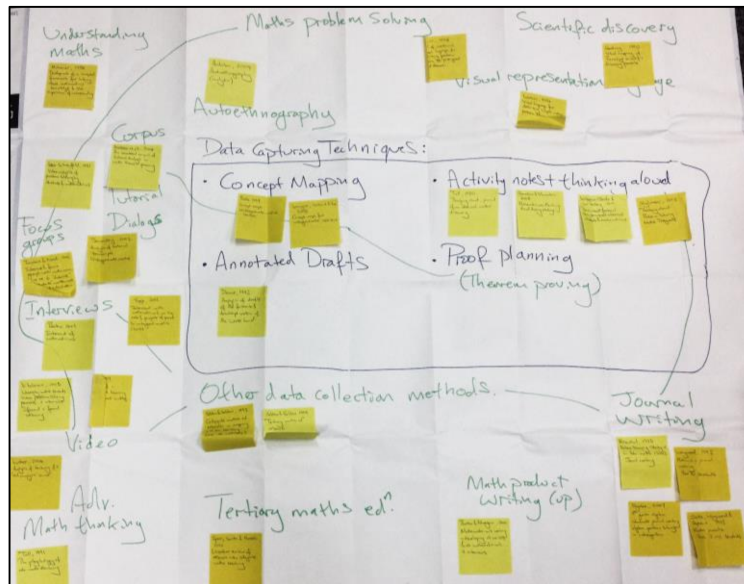

Figure 1: Mind map with Post-it notes representing individual sources

You will need to **identify more sources than you eventually use**. A rule of thumb is to identify **twice as many** sources than you eventually incorporate into your review. **Read these sources critically**, making notes.

Writing the review

A good literature review needs a **clear line of argument.** You therefore need to use the critical notes and comments you made whilst doing your reading to express your academic opinion.

Begin each theme of your review by **describing it** (answering shallower "who", "what", "when" questions), setting out the key concepts, known facts and accepted definitions using a descriptive argumentation style (this is also a good place to include short quotes). As you progress through the theme your writing should become **more discursive and include more critical analysis**, answering deeper "how", "which is better", "why", "what if" questions.

We recommend that you start each paragraph with a **topic sentence**, then develop this topic, then end it with a **conclusion**. Each paragraph should contain **one main point** or idea and be **at least four sentences long** (and **about 125 words long** on average).

A useful technique before drafting your paragraphs is to estimate the number of paragraphs in each theme based on the word count then plan your argument by **drafting a presentation slide** containing one point per paragraph – see Figure 2.

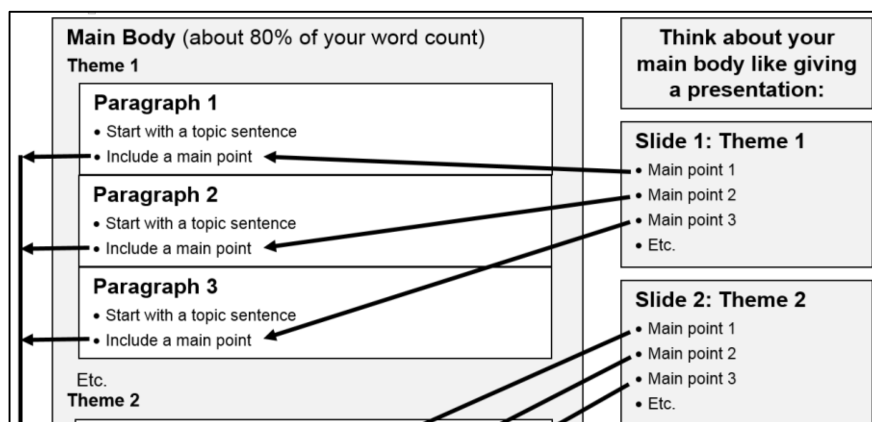

Figure 2: Argument and paragraph planning technique

Specific advice:

- The amount of words you spend on each source should reflect its relative importance
- Avoid several citations of the same source in the same paragraph by using **summaries**
- Use different **reporting verbs** (such as "argues", "claims", "states") to express differences in meaning/emphasis when introducing sources
- Use **linking words** (such as "for example", "in addition", "however", "in summary") to join sentences together into paragraphs
- Use **hedging** to express an appropriate degree of caution with your evaluations and conclusions, such as by considering in what circumstances a claim is true, or what proportion of scholars have concluded that it is true