

# Getting Started Right: Writing the Literature Review

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**UNC**

Writing  
Center

# First Steps

## Analysis and Assessment:

- Unlike many other genres, the goal of a literature review is *not* to argue for interpretation of based on research
- Instead, literature reviews assess the current state of research, noting trends, unanswered questions, or gaps
- Often, this assessment is your basis for further research action

# First Steps

Establish your intended purpose:

- To establish need: identifying shortcomings or gaps in existing research, and therefore the need for new research
- To establish ethos: the author communicates their awareness of critical or foundational literature in their area of study

# LR Structure: Overview

- I. Introduction
- II. Major Theme A
  - I. Sub-themes
- III. Major Theme B
  - I. Sub-themes
- IV. Major Theme C (repeat as necessary)
- V. Conclusion\*

# LR Structure: Introduction

## I. Introduction

- a. Describe the overall topic that you are investigating, why it is critical in your field, and your situational interest in the topic
- b. Describe the current situation of the topic in the field's discussion. Broadly state trends in research, methodology, and findings, but don't zoom in on small details yet; establish an overall view of the literature

*Why is it important?*

*What is the critical question or need that drives this research?*

# LR Structure: Major Themes

## II. Major Theme A

- a. Introduce the overall theme; establish commonalities or critical issues that all sub-themes below fit within

*Describe the general concept that unites a limited group of your findings.*

# LR Structure: Sub-themes

- b. Sub-theme - narrow collection of similar/related findings fitting within the major theme
  - i. Source 1 Analysis
  - ii. Source 2 Analysis
  - iii. Source 3 Analysis

*Expand; why is this part important to the Major Theme, and therefore the whole?*

*Source analysis is the core information that drives a literature review.*

Don't just report - *connect*.

For each source analysis:

- Summarize the source's research question, the methods used, and critical findings or conclusions

AND

- Make connections between sources in each sub-theme; build meaning; *show you are reading the field, not just one source*



# LR Structure: A Repeating Process

- c. Sub-theme - a *different* narrow collection of similar/related findings, still fitting within the earlier major theme
  - i. Source 4 Analysis
  - ii. Source 5 Analysis
  - iii. Source 6 Analysis
- d. ... and e. ... and f. - *repeat this structure as necessary with subsequent subthemes, still fitting within major theme*
- III. ... and IV... repeat all steps from above, but now with a new, separate major theme

see how the structure repeats? The approach is the same, but the focus differs as we proceed.

*Literature reviews  
expose the web-like  
connections between  
research.*

*Connect the strands.*

Referring to sources covered earlier is usually a good thing in literature reviews:

- There's no need to reintroduce and re-summarize; just highlight newly relevant details
- It may be helpful to your audience to note you are directing their attention backward momentarily

# LR Structure: Conclusion

- V. Conclusion\*: An evaluation/critique of the existing literature; this is longer than an essay conclusion
  - a. What are the contributions of this literature to the field?
  - b. What are the overall strengths?
  - c. What are the overall weaknesses?
  - d. What might be missing?
  - e. What are some next steps for research? The next steps should explicitly address how to “correct” for strengths, weaknesses, and gaps

*These details may appear earlier, depending on the field.*

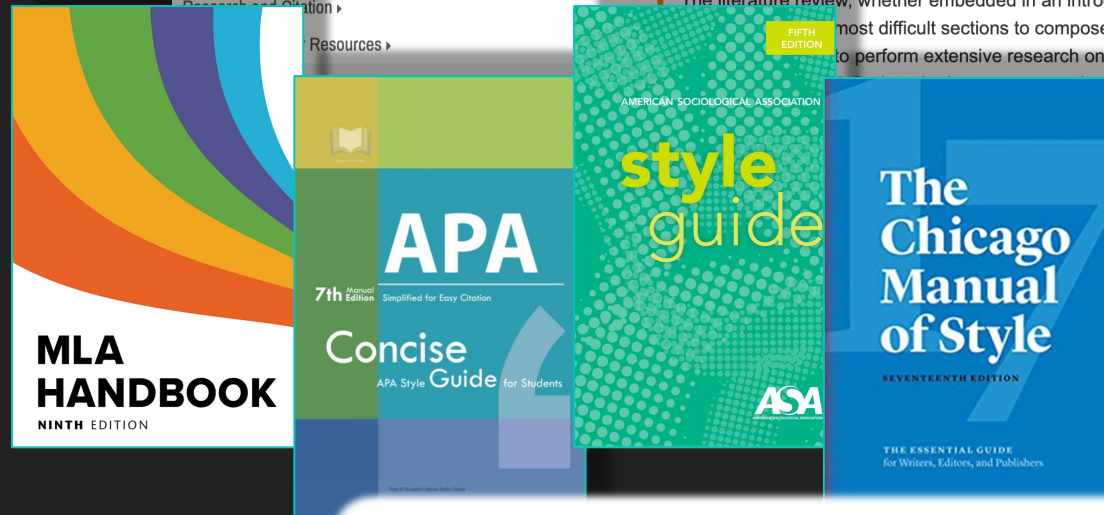
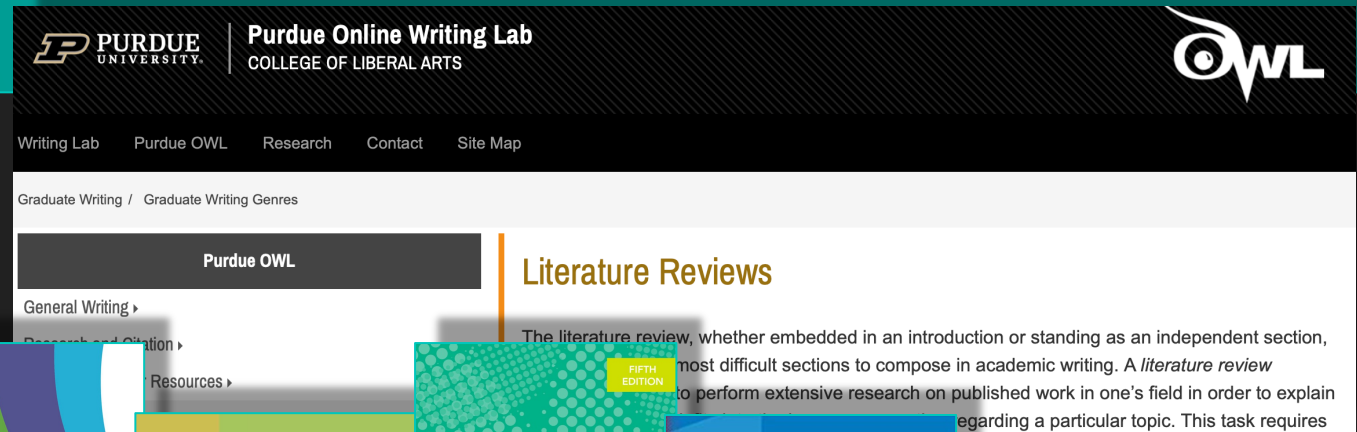
*Everything above leads to and supports these points*

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# Other Resources

- The Online Writing Lab at Purdue
- Style Guides
- The UNC Writing Center
- Your Instructor/Advisor\*



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Thank you!