

A literature review critically analyses existing literature to develop an argument.

Writing a literature review can be challenging because:

- you need to coordinate many sources and ideas into a logical argument
- you may be dealing with language and ideas you haven't fully mastered yet
- there are no fixed rules for what to include or how to organise your writing.

This is just a general guide to help you write a literature review. The specific requirements for your course may be different. Make sure you read through any assignment requirements carefully and ask your lecturer or tutor if you're unsure how to meet them.

## Purpose of a literature review

A literature review should demonstrate your overall understanding of the literature and develop an argument, often by answering specific questions. It shouldn't just list and summarise what you've read. Unlike other assignment types, you're often expected to determine the purpose of a literature review yourself.

Commonly, a literature review is written to help develop and justify a novel research question. But they have many other uses. For example, you may use a literature review to develop an argument that:

- justifies the significance or interest of a research question
- demonstrates your professional competence in a field of research
- critically reviews theory or methodological approaches
- weighs evidence to reach a conclusion or recommendation.

## Selecting relevant materials

Your literature review should only include relevant materials, and it should be clear how each work is relevant to your main argument.

When selecting materials you should:

- read widely – don't just cite papers produced by a particular research group, or from only one country or continent.
- use up-to-date material – if you're completing a PhD or MPhil, you'll need to update your confirmation literature review for your final thesis.
- include relevant landmark studies – show that you know the influential and highly cited works in your field, but make sure they're relevant to your argument.
- limit background information – only include background details that are needed to orient the reader and help them appreciate your argument.
- include as much evidence as needed – be selective about what you include, even if you're building on, updating or challenging previous work. To challenge a common assumption, include a representative list of papers to demonstrate that it's common; you don't have to list every paper that makes the assumption.

## Analysing the literature

Your literature review should provide a detailed justification for your main argument. You need to critically review the literature and synthesise your analysis into a logical argument.

This general process may help:

- familiarise yourself with the literature to learn what's been done and what's already known
- organise the materials around themes, issues or questions rather than individual papers
- critically review the information to identify things like assumptions, limitations, deficiencies, lack of clarity, methodological weaknesses, gaps, controversies and problems in existing knowledge or practice that need to be addressed.

## Organising your argument

Your literature review should be a logical, well-structured argument organised into an introduction, body and conclusion.

To help organise your argument:

- plan before you start writing – creating a mind map or outline can help to clarify your thinking before you start drafting.
- refine as you write – give yourself time to write many drafts, and refine the writing and structure of your argument as you go. Look for repetition and common themes.