

## Writing Literature Reviews

Literature reviews are a crucial piece of the academic research project, though many writers may find themselves wondering why. To some, these lit reviews may seem like busywork or like a request for a book report, but a successful literature review is much more than that.

Literature reviews provide, among other things, an opportunity for writers to articulate what drew them to a project in the first place. More importantly, however, literature reviews present an overview of previous work on your topic, thus setting a benchmark for your project. In addition, literature reviews allow you to explore, justify, question, and critique the research methodologies, solution techniques, problem-solving procedures, and overall conclusions you encountered in your review process. This in-depth analysis of your sources is what differentiates a literature review (which is essentially evaluative, i.e., it makes a judgment about the relative worth of each source) from a book report (which is essentially informative, i.e., it describes the content of a text without reflecting on its merit).

### **The Writing Process for a Literature Review**

To an outside reader in your field, a thorough literature review demonstrates that you are familiar with both historical and current research on your topic, and that you have considered a range of methodological approaches to your project. In other words, the lit review establishes your credibility as someone who has prepared carefully before embarking on independent research.

- ***Your first step in undertaking a literature review will obviously be to collect some literature on your subject.*** Typically, recent publications on your topic will have more weight than historical publications. Once you have carefully read each journal article or book, you should consider writing up a brief summary of the text using the questions on the following page. Remember: These summaries will probably not get incorporated into your final literature review. Their purpose is to help you clarify your understanding of what each text is arguing and what approach(es) the author(s) uses.
- ***Your next step is to cull through those summaries and to select only those books and articles that are relevant to your current research project.*** As Ming Tham, of the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne explains, "You may have read dozens upon dozens of papers, but there will be some that do not contribute to the points that you are trying to make, or there will be papers that give identical information. Because of the time you spent trying to understand them, you may be tempted incorporate all that you have read. Attempting to do this will make what is already a difficult task impossible."
- Once you have selected the sources you plan to include, you need to make some organizational decisions. Typically, organizing your literature review according to themes, methodologies, and/or underlying concepts is more effective than presenting each source one by one. As Tham notes, a conceptually-based structure "shows that you have an appreciation of the subject area."
- ***Finally, a successful literature review will not consist simply of a string of linked quotes or paraphrases.*** Over-reliance on the author's words or ideas suggests "book report" instead of "analytical

review." Your goal is to synthesize your summary of a source's ideas with your own opinions and comments on the source material. Tham explains that this integrated approach "demonstrate[s] your deeper understanding of the topic."

### **Five pre-writing questions for preliminary summaries**

1. What seems to be the author's main purpose? To offer advice, make practical suggestions, solve a specific problem? To critique? To establish the truth?
2. What kind of work is it, and who is its intended audience?
3. What is the principal point, conclusion, thesis, contention, or question?
4. What patterns or categories does the work use to divide up the subject matter being discussed?
5. What is new, different, or controversial about the work in terms of the course text?

### **Four organizing questions to help you figure out what each article adds to your research project**

1. Does the article reveal a gap in your field's understanding of your topic?
2. Will your research extend/support the conclusions that the author reaches, or will your research dispute the conclusions?
3. Does the article model a methodology that you hope to emulate or one you hope to challenge?
4. Is your proposed audience similar to or different from the author's intended audience?

### **Resources for Further Reading**

Reed, Lois. "Performing a Literature Review." n.d. 22 September 2004.  
<http://fie.engrng.pitt.edu/fie98/papers/1298.pdf>

Tham, Ming. "Writing Research Theses Or Dissertations (guidelines and tips)." Chemical Engineering and Advanced Materials: University of Newcastle Upon Tyne. 1 May 2001. 22 September 2004. <http://lorien.ncl.ac.uk/ming/Dept/Tips/writing/thesis/thesis-review.htm>

Adapted in part from Ming Tham's *Writing Research Theses or Dissertations*:  
<http://lorien.ncl.ac.uk/ming/Dept/Tips/writing/thesis/thesis-review.htm>