

How to Write a Literature Review

Parts of a Research Paper

- Abstract
- Introduction
- Literature Review
- Methodology
- Findings/Results
- Discussion
- Conclusion

Literature reviews are a vital part of a research project or paper, and they are particularly important during graduate school. This handout will focus on defining what a literature review is, how to organize and synthesize information, and what the different parts of a literature review are.

The Purpose of a Literature Review

A literature review demonstrates your ability to research; it also showcases your expertise on your chosen topic. By including a literature review in your project or thesis, you are also providing your reader with the most prevalent theories and studies on your topic, evaluations and comparisons of these studies, and gaps there may be in the literature. This helps your reader understand your project/thesis better. It also makes you a more credible and reliable author.

What *Isn't* a Literature Review?

A literature review is **not** an annotated bibliography. In an annotated bibliography, the writer presents a summary and critical evaluation of each article or scholarly resource, one by one, with little or no connection made between the various articles or resources. This is very different from the synthesizing and comparing of information in a literature review. Additionally, a literature review is also **not** an essay, report, or research paper, as it does **not** state, prove, or develop main points. A literature review does **not** answer a question, nor is it a list of summarized articles.

What *Is* a Literature Review?

A literature review is a review or discussion of the current published material available on a particular topic. It attempts to **synthesize** and **evaluate** the material and information according to the research question(s), thesis, and central theme(s). In other words, instead of supporting an argument, or simply making a list of summarized research, a literature review synthesizes and evaluates the ideas of others on your given topic. This allows your readers to know what is being said about your given topic, how these sources compare with one another, and what gaps there are in the research.

Three Types of Literature Review Organization

Organization Type	Explanation	Usage
Chronological	Organized by publication date or history of topic	Use this type if sequential order of events is important
Thematic	Organized by topic or issue, may still involve chronology or an order of importance	Use this type to go from general topic themes to more specific (e.g., education to higher education to writing centers)
Methodological	Organized not by the content of lit review material, but on the methods of the researcher/writer	Use this type if the methods of the researchers/writers are the most important

Summary, Synthesis, and Evaluation

Remember, to **summarize** means to recap the important information of the source; whereas, to **synthesize** means to re-organize, re-shuffle, or re-interpret that information and involves finding connections and relationships among your sources. Synthesizing research shows an awareness of how research from different articles can be intertwined. Additionally, to **evaluate** means to assess the worth of something. This means that while you are synthesizing the information of a certain resource, be sure to also include an evaluation of that resource.

Examples of Summary, Synthesis, and Evaluation

Topic: Communication styles between married men and women

Sources:

Booth-Butterfield, M. & Frisby, B.B. (2012). The “how” and “why” of flirtatious communication between marital partners. *Communication Quarterly*, 60(4), 465-480.

Frisby, B.N. (2009). “Without flirting, it wouldn’t be a marriage”: Flirtatious communication between relational partners. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, 10(1), 55-60. doi: 10.1080/17459430902839066

Horan, S.M. & Booth-Butterfield, M. (2010). Investing in affection: An investigation of affection exchange theory and relational qualities. *Communication Quarterly*, 58(4), 394-413. doi: 10.1080/01463373.2010.524876

Summary	In Frisby and Booth-Butterfield’s study, they provide research on how flirting with one’s spouse creates positive benefits within the relationship.
Synthesis	In Frisby and Booth-Butterfield’s (2012) research on the purpose of flirtation, they found that the biggest reason for flirtation within marriage was to create a more intimate world between the couple and to encourage sex. They also found

	that women were more likely to utilize flirtation. However, in a separate study on flirtation, men were also found to use attentive flirting as a way to make their wives feel attractive (Frisby, 2009). Agreeing with previous research, Frisby found that men usually flirt to engage in sex, and women flirt to encourage attention, fun, and interest in their spouses.
Evaluation	Overall, Horan and Booth-Butterfield's study demonstrates the great effects of negative communication on the perceptions of perspective-taking between spouses.

Parts of a Literature Review

A literature review is composed of three parts:

- **Introduction**
 - Keep it brief: most commonly only a paragraph long, but can go up to 1.5 pages.
 - Introduce the larger subject.
 - Narrow that larger subject into your manageable topic.
 - Explain the significance of the topic.
 - Formulate research question(s).
 - Explain the scope of your coverage (what criteria was used to include or exclude studies and why).
 - Lay out the organization of the review (forecasting statements).
- **Body**
 - Provide some background information (e.g. definition of concepts, historical perspective(s) on the issue, etc.).
 - Group the research according to themes, trends, approaches, etc.
 - Summarize individual items with as much detail as merited (determined by its comparative significance within your overall paper).
 - Weave citations/descriptions of the literature with your analysis and show the reader how this connects to your overall research question(s).
 - Point out any methodological flaws, gaps in research, or inconsistencies in theory and findings.
- **Conclusion**
 - Summarize major contributions of significant studies and articles to the body of knowledge under review.
 - Point out any gaps in the published literature and discuss areas or issues pertinent to future study.

Tips on Citation

Citing your resources is required for all kinds of writing projects. Literature reviews are no exception. Remember that it is important to cite, not only direct quotes, but paraphrased sentences as well. A paraphrased sentence is when a you take a passage from a source and rewrite it in your own words. In addition to citing quotes and paraphrased sentences, remember to maintain only one citation style throughout your literature review; you cannot use more than one citation style in a given paper.

Sample Literature Review with Annotations

Excerpt from “Audience Address on Dating Profiles: My Desired-Other and Second Person Reference,” by Amy Russo, San José State University

When a user makes an online personal profile, they are crafting an online artifact, or a contained and recorded performance, which can be accessed countless times asynchronously through websites by unknown users, and as artifacts can act as proxies for the profile makers themselves (Hogan, 2010; Reed, 2005). As Ellison et al. (2006) observed, a profile is “a crucial self-presentation tool because it is the first and primary means of expressing one’s self during the early stages of a correspondence and can therefore foreclose or create relationship opportunities” (p. 423). Users of dating sites such as OkCupid usually do not know other users before coming into contact. Indeed, the purpose of dating profiles is to connect people who are strangers for potentially personal and intimate relationships.

Dating profiles as artifacts are tools to separate the desired-others (auditor-addressees) from the undesired-others (auditor-overhearers). For writers, Ede and Lunsford (1984) make the distinction between the actual audience (the real readers) and the audience invoked (the envisioned group the writer constructs and writes for). On dating profiles, the actual audience is all the readers of the profile. The audience invoked is *only* the desired others, because profiles are written for the intended purpose of selling the profile makers to and attracting their desired-others (Ellison et al., 2006; Fiore, Taylor, & Mendelsohn, 2008; Jagger, 1998).

In this paragraph, the author has synthesized the literature by discussing multiple findings to express their ideas.

The author uses APA citation style and maintains it throughout the paper.

Note: the author doesn’t just use quotes and paraphrases, but includes their own ideas, evaluations, and analysis of the topic.

Activity

Read the following sources carefully. Then, in a paragraph that summarizes, synthesizes, and evaluates the information from these two sources, write on the topic of media affecting presidential elections.

Source 1:

The advent of television in the late 1940's gave rise to the belief that a new era was opening in public communication. As Frank Stanton, president of the Columbia Broadcasting System, put it: "Not even the sky is the limit." One of the great contributions expected of television lay in its presumed capacity to inform and stimulate the political interests of the American electorate. "Television, with its penetration, its wide geographic distribution and impact, provides a new, direct, and sensitive link between Washington and the people," said Dr. Stanton. "The people have once more become the nation, as they have not been since the days when we were small enough each to know his elected representative. As we grew, we lost this feeling of direct contact—television has now restored it." As time has passed, events have seemed to give substance to this expectation. The televising of important congressional hearings, the national nominating conventions, and most recently the Nixon-Kennedy and other debates have appeared to make a novel contribution to the political life of the nation. Large segments of the public have been given a new, immediate contact with political events. Television has appeared to be fulfilling its early promise.

(Excerpt from Campbell, Angus. "Has Television Reshaped Politics?" In *Encyclopedia of Television / Museum of Broadcast Communications*, vol. 1, ed. Horace Newcomb. New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2005.)

Source 2:

April 20, 1992: Not a historic date perhaps, but a suggestive one. It was on this date [while campaigning for President] that Bill Clinton discussed his underwear with the American people (briefs, not boxers, as it turned out). Why would the leader of the free world unburden himself like this? Why not? In television's increasingly postmodern world, all texts—serious and sophomoric—swirl together in the same discontinuous field of experience. To be sure, Mr. Clinton made his disclosure because he had been asked to do so by a member of the MTV generation, not because he felt a sudden need to purge himself. But in doing so Clinton exposed several rules connected to the new phenomenology of politics: (1) because of television's celebrity system, Presidents are losing their distinctiveness as social actors and hence are often judged by standards formerly used to assess rock singers and movie stars; (2) because of television's sense of intimacy, the American people feel they know their Presidents as persons and hence no longer feel the need for party guidance; (3) because of the medium's archly cynical worldview, those who watch politics on television are increasingly turning away from the policy sphere, years of hyper-familiarity having finally bred contempt for politics itself.

(Excerpt from Hart, Roderick P., and Mary Triece, "U.S. Presidency and Television." Available at http://www.museum.tv/debateweb/html/equalizer/essay_usprestv.htm.)

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