What is a Literature Review?

Before you begin your literature review, it is important to understand what it is. Literature reviews are used in different ways for research. Literature reviews can be incorporated into larger research papers in order to provide background or contextual information on new research that is being conducted. They can also stand alone as a scholarly article, in which case the purpose is to synthesize and compare existing research on a topic to provide a greater understanding of the overall topic. In both cases, the literature review should be a discussion of previous research on a topic, not just a list of articles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A literature review is:</th>
<th>A literature review is not:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• a synthesis or overview of the research on a particular topic</td>
<td>• A list of articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• a critical analysis of the existing literature</td>
<td>• An annotated bibliography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• a means to identify gaps in the existing research or areas of further study</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Steps in the Literature Review Process

1. Define your problem or research question.
2. Search for articles on your topic.
3. Read articles.
4. If necessary, repeat steps 2 and 3.
5. Evaluate and organize your findings. Identify gaps in the research.
6. Synthesize what you have found in a way that presents the current state of research on your topic, including various perspectives, findings, and gaps.

Finding the Literature

Once you’ve chosen and defined a topic, use the library databases to find existing research in that area. Make sure that your article search is thorough. It’s important in a literature review to discuss the most influential and relevant articles that have been written on your topic.
Use the ‘Mini Literature Review – Searching for Articles’ tip sheet to help you conduct a thorough search.

In some cases, there might be a large amount of research on a topic. If you are finding too many articles that seem relevant, you may have to narrow your topic – focus on one particular aspect or part of your topic. In other cases, you may have difficulty finding enough articles to write your review. If that happens, you may have to broaden your topic.

**Example**

**Topic:** What role do school vending machines play in childhood obesity?

If you find too many articles, you might consider narrowing your search to focus on middle schools or sugar-sweetened drinks only. If you are not finding enough articles, you might broaden your search to include all food services (i.e. cafeterias, vending machines, etc.) in schools or include other locations (community centres, recreation facilities, etc.) where vending machines are available to children.

Don’t expect to find all of your articles at once. As you read through the research, you will likely come across aspects of your topic that you hadn’t thought of previously. You can then go back to the databases and modify your original search to include those aspects.

**Analyzing Articles**

Once you’ve found relevant articles, you can use them to:

- Find other relevant articles
- Identify gaps in the literature
- Contribute to your discussion of the topic

**Find other relevant articles**

Research is not generally meant to stand alone. Rather, it builds upon prior research and sets the stage for further research. Most articles that you find will contain a literature review section. Reading the literature review section and using the reference list will help you track down additional articles that are relevant to your topic. As you read through several literature reviews, you will notice that some articles are referenced again and again. This is a clue that these articles have been particularly influential to researchers of your topic.

**Identify gaps**

In many cases, gaps in the research will be mentioned explicitly in the articles that you find. When you are reading your articles, pay attention to instances in which the researcher notes existing gaps in the literature. These can often be found in the Discussion, Further Research, Limitations, or Conclusion sections of articles.
If you’ve conducted a thorough search of the databases and haven’t found any articles on one or more aspects of your topic, this may also be an indication that there is a gap in the research.

**Contribute to your discussion**

As you’re reading, you may find that the body of literature focuses on a few specific themes or aspects of your topic. Grouping the literature based on themes is a great way to organize your literature review in order to develop a thorough discussion of each aspect and to create a logical flow to your review.

It’s a good idea to read as many articles as you can and become familiar with your topic before you begin writing. You’ll want to know which aspects of your topic you want to discuss and ensure that you have articles related to each aspect.

When you are reading your articles, keep in mind that the purpose of your review is not to summarize each article that you have found. For each article, try to focus on what was studied, the findings and conclusions of the study, and how it fits into the larger body of research. Once you have gathered this information for each article, you can begin to write a coherent literature review on the topic.

**Example of a literature review**

Here is an example of a literature review on the shortage of nursing faculty. McDermid, Peters, Jackson, and Daly (2012) write that the articles written about the shortage have focused on five key issues (p. 566). For each issue, several examples of studies are provided. The authors end with a discussion of areas that require further research and a short conclusion. Here is a quick summary of the outline of their paper.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction to the issue: There is a shortage of nursing faculty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do studies on this issue say? Five main reasons for this shortage have been talked about in research articles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Need for Masters/Doctoral degrees – Examples of articles that talked about this issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Aging workforce – Examples of articles that talked about this issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Salary differences for clinical and academic work – Examples of articles that talked about this issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Need to learn new culture and roles in colleges and universities – Examples of articles that talked about this issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Problems adapting to new culture – Examples of articles that talked about this issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion of gaps in literature and areas for future study</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Need help?**

Please visit the library information desk. Our summer hours are available online at [http://www.mtroyal.ca/Library/](http://www.mtroyal.ca/Library/).