

The LSS 'How to' Series



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Literature Review Guide

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Literature Review Guide

Many students find the task of writing a literature review intimidating, because they've never done anything like it before. The important thing to remember, though, is that it's just another type of writing. This guide is here to help you understand what a lit review is and how to approach it step-by-step.

The main thing to keep in mind is that the literature review exists to **help your lecturer help you**. By writing up a lit review, you show that you have a workable idea and that you are ready to move on to the next step. Any problems with your topic or any obstacles to finishing your thesis will be clear to your supervisor from reading your lit review — and it's certainly much better to find such problems early, rather than after you've spent a year working on the thesis.

This guide will help you out with some tips and steps to get you through the lit review process.

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There's no need to be afraid of the literature review. It's a piece of writing like any other. It will be easier to understand how to approach it when you understand what it's for. The lit review has three main purposes:

- **Catch the reader up.** You will have now done a lot of research on this topic. Your reader won't have any of that information. Part of your job in the literature review is to educate the reader on what research has already been done in the field so they can understand what you have to say later on in the thesis.
- **Critically evaluate.** Do different sources contradict each other? Why is that? Is one older than the other? Are there many interpretations of the same data? Are there many competing ideas about how to approach the topic? You don't have to be an expert on these questions, or even have an opinion about the 'right' answer, but if it's part of what a reader needs to know to understand the topic, then we should have some idea about it by the end of the lit review.
- **Show the gaps.** Now you've explained what the academic community already knows about the topic— so where do *you* come in? What has not yet been covered that you're about to take on? Show us what has not been covered in the current state of the art, and how your research is going to fill that gap.

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Some tips to keep in mind:

- The literature review section will most likely **not** consist of doing one of these things after the other. They will all happen more or less at the same time.
- The chapter or section can be organized by topic or by source.
- Your lecturer or tutor may have a system or plan of how they want the lit review to be written or organized. Be sure to pay attention to these requirements and deliver the type of lit review that your lecturer expects
- As you're reading and writing, remember that you will eventually need to come up with a strong thesis statement. You don't need to have it finished now, but the sooner you start thinking about it, the easier it will be.
- Taking good notes while you read will make the writing a lot easier. The guide on the next page may help you collect the relevant information.
- There's more to 'literature' than just books! You may find useful information in journal articles, newspapers, or even lectures on the internet. Anything that helps you understand the topic is worth looking into, even if you don't end up citing it in your paper.

Literature Review Guide

Fill out one of these guides for each source you intend to discuss in your lit review.

Title _____

Author _____

Journal /Book (if applicable) _____

Publisher _____

Place of publication _____

Date _____

What are the main points of the source?

How is the source relevant to your work?

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What are the strengths of the source?

What are the weaknesses of the source?

Does this source conflict with any of your other sources? How and why?