

## The Literature Review

A literature review should map out the research discussion on a specific topic that has taken place up to that point. It does not simply describe or summarize sources. It is arranged around your ideas and explains what has been done in this area of research.

A literature review is organized much like an essay – it is a narrative. As such, it has a thesis statement or research question, an introduction, a middle, and a conclusion. A good review also includes topic sentences and transitions to signal the reader that a new concept or theme is coming.

A literature review may stand on its own but is often part of a larger research paper. In an academic research paper, the writer attempts to develop a new argument, possibly addressing gaps in the existing research.

Different disciplines have different approaches to a review. The humanities might explore a more obvious argument while the sciences tend to rely on research designs and results. It is helpful to find and study an example of a literature review in your discipline.

It is advisable to begin by creating an annotated bibliography from which you can select the sources that you wish to include in your literature review. However, a literature review and an annotated bibliography are quite different projects. (See our handout on Annotated Bibliographies.) While a source only appears once in an annotated bibliography, it may appear several times in a literature review.

The following examples are quoted from *Seven Steps to Writing a Literature Review*. Guides at University of Guelph, McLaughlin Library.

The first example gives a summary of the articles.

The second example provides analysis as well.

Student A: Smith (2000) concludes that personal privacy in their living quarters is the most important factor in nursing home resident's perception of their autonomy. He suggests that the physical environment in the more public spaces of the building did not have much impact on their perceptions. Neither the layout of the building nor the activities available seem to make much difference. Jones and Johnstone make the claim that the need to control one's environment is a fundamental need of life (2001), and suggest that the approach of most institutions, which is to provide total care, may be as bad as no care at all. If people have no choices or think they have none, they become depressed.

Student B: After studying residents and staff from two intermediate care facilities in Calgary, Alberta, Smith (2000) came to the conclusion that except for the amount of personal privacy to residents, the physical environment of these institutions had minimal if any effect on their perceptions of control (autonomy). However, French (1998) and Haroon (2000) found that availability of private areas is not the only aspect of the physical environment that determines residents' autonomy. Haroon interviewed 115 residents from 32 different nursing homes known to have different levels of autonomy (2000). It was found that physical structures, such as standardized furniture, heating that could not be individually regulated and no possession of a house key for residents limited their feelings of independence. Moreover, Hope (2002), who interviewed 225 residents from various nursing homes, substantiates the claim that characteristics of the institutional environment such as the extent or resources in the facility, as well as its location, are features which residents have indicated as being of great importance to their independence.

## Organization of a literature review

### Introduction

Clearly present your topic and thesis statement or research question.

Identify the parameters – the scope – of your research (what you will and will not examine in your research).

### Body

There are several methods of organization of the body. Chronological and thematic are two common methods.

1. Chronological: sources are arranged according to their development over time.
2. Thematic: sources are arranged according to topics and themes. This is generally the stronger of the two. You should find areas where the authors agree and where they disagree. Arrange your sources accordingly.

### Conclusion

This summarizes the major topics or trends that your research has discovered.

It is also where you can justify your research question or proposal.

Therefore, you should tie it back to your original question or statement.

Material quoted from:

University of Guelph, McLaughlin Library: *Seven Steps to Writing a Literature Review*

Material adapted from:

Purdue Owl, Purdue University

Wilfrid Laurier University

