



# FACT SHEET: Writing Literature Reviews

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## Purpose of Resource

The purpose of this resource is to support learners to prepare and write a literature reviews for the purposes of project planning, project development and funding applications. This tip sheet will:

- explain what a literature review is;
- identify 'the literature'; and
- describe the process and structure for developing a literature review.

## Units of Competency

This resources support learning and completion of assessment for the following units of competency:

- HLTPOP501C Apply a Population Health Framework
- HLTPOP503C Plan a Population Health Project

## Acknowledgement

This tip sheet has been adapted from *Literature Review Academic Tip Sheet*, Edith Cowan University, 2008, Australia.

## Introduction

A literature review may be presented as a paper on its own, or it can be contained as an integral part of a study, funding proposal or report. It describes, compares, contrasts and evaluates the major theories, arguments, themes, methodologies, approaches and controversies in the literature on a subject.

The literature review is:

- not an annotated bibliography.
- not a summary of each of your sources listed one by one.
- not just a descriptive summary of the historical background to your topic.

In a literature review, your central focus is examining and evaluating what has been said before on a topic, and establishing the relevance of this information to your own research or funding proposal. You may also identify what has not been said in the literature on a subject (this is called 'a gap in the literature', and filling such gaps with new knowledge or programs.

## What is 'Literature'?

Literature broadly refers to information relevant to your topic of interest. Such works may deal specifically or more generally with your topic of interest. While such information may be obtained from a variety of sources, including books, journal articles, reports, etc., the focus is on scholarly published materials.

Literature source material can be categorised as a:

- **Primary source:** Original research from journals, articles or conferences, original materials such as historical documents, or creative works such as art or literature.
- **Secondary source:** Evaluations, reviews or syntheses of original work
- **Tertiary source:** Broadly scoped material put together usually from secondary sources to provide an overview, e.g. a textbook.

To limit the scope of your work, you will need to decide what literature to select for your review. In general, the source material is appropriate if it has:

- relevance – it should contribute to the development of your topic, clarify your position, provide an alternative point of view you wish to argue against or provide useful primary source material.
- authority – it should be published in a reputable journal, have been critically evaluated, been used extensively as a source material, been peer reviewed or be a recognised authority in the area.
- currency – it should be recent research or still be influential in the area.

Cite

Compare

Contrast

Critique

Connect

## The 5C's for Writing a Literature Review

Since a literature review is information dense, it is crucial that the work is structured to enable a reader to grasp the key points and arguments with ease.

1. **Cite:** keep the primary focus on the literature.
2. **Compare** the various arguments, theories, methodologies, approaches and findings expressed in the literature: what do the authors agree on? Who employs similar approaches?
3. **Contrast** the various arguments, themes, methodologies, approaches and controversies expressed in the literature: what are the major areas of disagreement, controversy, debate?
4. **Critique** the literature: which arguments are more persuasive, and why? Which approaches, findings, methodologies seem most reliable, valid, or appropriate, and why? Pay attention to the verbs you use to describe what it is an author says/does: e.g. asserts, demonstrates, etc.
5. **Connect** the literature to your own area of research and investigation: how does your own work draw on/depart from/synthesise what has been said in the literature?

## Writing a Literature Review (The Process)

Writing a literature review can be a lengthy endeavour – be sure to give yourself plenty of time. Bear in mind that your reading and writing will feed into each other.

You should:

- Identify research questions/areas/issues themes of investigation – what are you searching the literature to discover?
- Preview sample literature reviews in the same field.
- Obtain relevant sources.
- Keep bibliographical records of all sources referred to.
- Critically read each source (read for the arguments presented rather than for 'facts'). Make notes on the key questions/areas/issues/themes identified earlier.
- Evaluate the logic/cogency of each source, and its relevance to your own work.
- Organise material under subheadings according to various categories, chronology or similarities/differences in arguments or theories/findings.
- Write a mini-introduction, a series of paragraphs and a mini-conclusion for each of these categories.
- Write the introduction and conclusion to the literature review last.
- Draft and re-draft.

## The Structure of a Literature Review

Like a standard academic essay, a literature review is made up of three key components: an introduction, a body and a conclusion.

Most literature reviews can follow the following format.

- **Introduction:** Introduce the topic/problem and the context within which it is found.
- **Body:** Examine past research in the area highlighting methodological and/or theoretical developments, areas of agreement, contentious areas, important studies and so forth. Keep the focus on your area of interest and identify gaps in the research that your research/investigation will attempt to fill. State clearly how your work builds on or responds to earlier work.
- **Conclusion:** Summarise what has emerged from the review of literature and reiterate conclusions.

## Literature Review Check List

- Did you outline the scope and purpose of the review?
- Have you identified appropriate source material mainly from primary and secondary sources?
- Did you keep bibliographical records of all the researched material?
- Is each source critically reviewed?
- Have you organised all the material you obtained from the sources?
- Have you developed your approach?
- Have you written a draft and edited it carefully?
- Is your literature review submitted on time and in the correct format?

## Additional Reading and Links

<http://www.canberra.edu.au/studyskills/writing/literature>

<https://student.unsw.edu.au/getting-started-your-literature-review>

[http://www.csu.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/82796/LitReview.pdf](http://www.csu.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/82796/LitReview.pdf)

<http://www.citewrite.qut.edu.au/write/litreview.jsp>

[http://sydney.edu.au/stuserv/learning\\_centre/help/thesis/th\\_litReview.shtml](http://sydney.edu.au/stuserv/learning_centre/help/thesis/th_litReview.shtml)