

What is a literature review?

A literature review is the section of a research paper that discusses and analyzes the existing research on the paper's topic. Rather than simply summarizing the sources you draw from, you should use the literature review to connect, compare, and contrast the various expert opinions on the subject. Do not, for instance, list and summarize your sources one by one. Instead, organize the paper around the subtopics and trends that emerge in your sources.

Exploring the main ideas from previous research accomplishes two key goals for graduate writers: showing expertise in the field, and creating a space for their own research. A careful analysis of existing research demonstrates to instructors that a student writer understands and thinks critically about the topic. From there, the student writer has earned their readers' trust, and the writer's own research will be viewed more favorably.

Synthesis

If a writer's goal in drafting a literature review is to demonstrate a knowledge of the field, "synthesis" is their best tool. Synthesis is a process of drawing from multiple academic sources to create a whole understanding of the subject, at least as it pertains to the particular writing assignment. As you read through expert writing on the topic, try sorting out recurring major themes and subtopics. You might try organizing these subtopics with a "synthesis matrix":

Topic	Author 1	Author 2	Author 3
Subtopic 1			
Subtopic 2			

This allows you to sort the information from your sources by subtopic. When writing about any given subtopic, you should try to use multiple sources as evidence. Compare and contrast different authors' results and viewpoints. Where do they agree? Or disagree? What areas still need to be studied?

For more information, see the writing guides on "Synthesis" and "Synthesis Matrices".

How should I organize my literature review?

The structure of professional literature reviews varies from paper to paper. Here are some of the most common organizational structures:

- **Chronological:** Trace the history of the field. This structure is useful when discoveries build on top of each other, but if the sources you discuss move in different directions, chronology may be a weak ordering.
- **General-to-specific:** Begin with the broader field, then move into the specific topic you will research. Most papers will follow this pattern to some extent, first exploring a wider range of research before homing in on a specific research question.

- **Categorical:** Cover different aspects of the topic one by one. This structure works well when your research question combines several topics that are not directly related. Each subtopic can be discussed on its own, then connections can be drawn between them.

Many literature reviews will contain elements of several approaches. You might, for example, start with a general overview of the field, and then follow the history of a line of research specific to your own paper.

What kind of language should I use when talking about other sources?

Swales and Feak (2004) discuss a few common language patterns found in professional and academic literature reviews.

1. Past tense, referencing individual researchers:

Chan (2020) noted that ...

Research from Tannen (1999, 2004) indicated that...

2. Present perfect tense, referencing areas of study:

Several studies have examined the relation between family wealth and school performance (Jones, 1999; Winward, 2005; de la Rosa, 2012).

3. Present tense, referencing current knowledge on the topic:

Changes in global temperature have a number of interrelated causes (Wu, 2017; Anderson, 2019).

Swales and Feak note that any of these patterns could be adapted to cover other types of information, and doing so can add variety to longer literature reviews.