



UNIVERSITY OF
CANBERRA

AUSTRALIA'S CAPITAL UNIVERSITY



Literature Review

There are different ways to structure a literature review; refer to your unit outline to identify any faculty guidelines.

'Literature' covers everything relevant that is written on a topic, including: books, journal articles, newspaper articles, historical records, government reports, theses and dissertations. Check with your unit convenor or supervisor when in doubt.

What is the purpose of a literature review?

A literature review is a description of the literature relevant to a particular field or topic. It is often an examination of what research has already been done in an area to identify where further research could be conducted. It therefore helps you determine the nature and reason for further research.

In undergraduate courses, unit convenors often set literature reviews to encourage you to read broadly so as to develop a deep understanding of your subject area. You need to read the literature thoroughly so you can think critically about the literature and the relevancy of the research.

The literature search

Before you start searching, it is effective practice to create a search strategy. This should include identifying keywords, and synonyms of those keywords, for typing into the search box of the search tool you are using. Some useful places to search for the literature include:

- unit readings and references
- reference lists in key textbooks and recent journal articles
- UCanFind, the Library's search tool
- Library Subject Guides for a list of databases and resources that are relevant to your subject area (<http://canberra.libguides.com/>)
- The Library page "Databases A-Z" for a list of all of the databases to which the library subscribes (<http://www.canberra.edu.au/library/research-gateway/databases>).

It is important to remember that you will not find all the literature you need in one simple search. For a comprehensive search use different combinations of search terms, across multiple search tools. Before reading in-depth, skim and scan the literature to determine whether it is relevant to your topic.

Record the full bibliographical details of each information source as soon as you decide to use it. This will save you significant time later on.

If you would like some assistance with finding information sources, you can get help from the Library and Study Skills services or through the Finding Information Resources module on the Study Help Moodle site (<http://learnonline.canberra.edu.au/mod/scorm/view.php?id=1113784>).

Reading the literature

You are reading to find out how each piece of writing approaches the subject of your research, what it contributes to the subject, and how it relates to your topic. You may like to use the questions outlined below to inform your reading.

- Is it a general text or does it focus on a specific issue(s)?
- What type of report or study is it?
- What definitions does it use?
- In what ways does this book or article contribute to your understanding of the topic?
- What are the strengths and limitations of the study?
- How does this information compare with what other authors are writing?
- What is the theoretical basis?
- What is the general methodological approach? What methods are used?
- What kinds of data does it use to back up its argument?
- What conclusions does it reach?

Writing the review

Having gathered the relevant details about the literature, you are now prepared to write the review. You should always check the specific requirements in the unit outline, but generally a literature review will involve classifying and evaluating the key themes of the text. Each paragraph or section of the review could deal with a different theme. Your literature review should include an introduction, body and conclusion.

The introduction

The introduction provides a concise definition of the topic. It also outlines the scope of the literature that is being investigated and provides a link to how this review ties in with your own research.

Your introduction may include:

- the nature of the subject under discussion
- the parameters of the subject (what does it include and exclude)
- the basis for your selection of the literature.

The body

The body paragraphs combine ideas from a range of sources in order to group and present common ideas, arguments or themes. This is called synthesising and is an excellent skill that all university students need to develop and display. Be careful not to simply provide a series of summaries.

The body paragraphs may include:

- the current schools of thought, including differing theoretical assumptions, differing political outlooks, or other conflicts
- current approaches to the topic
- principal questions raised
- definitions
- methodologies and methods
- a summary of conclusions.

The conclusion

The conclusion may include:

- a summary of major agreements and disagreements in the literature
- an overall evaluation
- recommendations.

Handy links

Writing a Literature Review, Monash University:

<http://www.monash.edu.au/lis/lionline/writing/general/lit-reviews/index.xml>

Writing a Literature Review, QUT:

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