

## What is a literature review?

The aim of a literature review is to demonstrate that you have read, and have a good understanding of, the main published work concerning a particular topic or question in your subject area.

A literature review is a critical evaluation of what researchers have written on your topic - it is not just a simple summary of the information. You need to analyse each point of view as well as identify any strengths or weaknesses you may find in their research methods or findings.

It is important to select your sources carefully - you do not need to include everything you have read on the topic. Concentrate on publications that have influenced the field and have been written by reputable authors such as university academics. Use a variety of sources that are relevant and of a high quality such as books: journal articles, websites, conference proceedings and government reports.

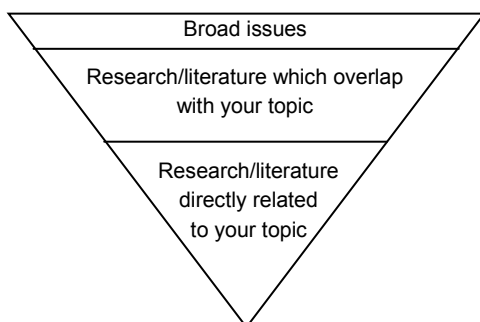
### A good literature review...

- is more than just a list of relevant literature.
- considers the range of literature available.
- is a critical summary of the literature.
- gives opinions and personal response to the different writings.
- relates different writings to each other, compares and contrasts.
- does not take the literature at face value.
- shows an awareness of the theories and values that underpin the research.
- uses particular reporting verbs such as: assert, argue, state, conclude, contend.

## Writing your literature review

Writing a literature review is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. You need to figure out how each piece of writing fits together as well as identifying any missing pieces.

One common way to approach a literature review is to start out broad and then become more specific. Think of it as a upside-down triangle.



Start by giving a general outline of the broad issues related to your topic or question. You just need to demonstrate that you are aware of all the major issues surrounding it.

Then narrow your focus to deal with the research and literature that overlaps with your topic.

Finally, hone in on any research and literature which is directly related to your topic. This should form the largest proportion of your writing.

Adapted from University of Reading. *Starting a literature review*. Retrieved from <http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/studyadvice/StudyResources/Essays/sta-startinglitreview.aspx>

## Before you begin to write your literature review

### Define your problem

- Which topic or field is being explored ?
- What are the main issues?
- Where do you define the boundaries?

### Search the literature

- Find materials relevant to what you are exploring
- Evaluate what you read.
  - Think about
    - \* Is it relevant to your topic?
    - \* Is it up to date?
    - \* Is the information reliable and accurate?
    - \* How are you going to organise and keep track of your sources?

Just like an essay, a literature review needs an introduction, a body, and a conclusion.

## The introduction

It is important to have a good introduction that clearly tells the reader what the literature will be about. An introduction must tell the reader the following:

- what you are going to cover in the review
- the scope of your research
- how the review ties in with your own research topic. (If it is part of a larger research project)

### Introduction example (on the topic of self-motivation)

Many theories have been proposed to explain what motivates human behaviour. Although the literature covers a wide variety of such theories, this review will focus on five major themes which emerge repeatedly throughout the literature reviewed. These themes are: incorporation of the self-concept into traditional theories of motivation, the influence of rewards on motivation, the increasing importance of internal forces of motivation, autonomy and self-control as sources of motivation, and narcissism as an essential component of motivation. Although the literature represents these themes in a variety of contexts, this paper will primarily focus on their application to self-motivation.

Adapted from RMIT University Learning Lab. *Literature review*. Retrieved from <http://emedia.rmit.edu.au/learninglab/content/literature-review-tutorial>

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This is a good example of an introduction because it has a topic sentence which indicates what will be covered and also tells the reader the specific focus of the literature review in the concluding sentence.

Look how the introduction is broken down into three main parts.

Many theories have been proposed to explain what motivates human behaviour.

Although the literature covers a wide variety of such theories, this review will focus on five major themes which emerge repeatedly throughout the literature reviewed.

*Topic sentence: Identifies five major themes as the scope of this review.*

These themes are: incorporation of the self-concept into traditional theories of motivation, the influence of rewards on motivation, the increasing importance of internal forces of motivation, autonomy and self-control as sources of motivation, and narcissism as an essential component of motivation.

*Five major themes identified.*

Although the literature represents these themes in a variety of contexts, this paper will primarily focus on their application to self motivation.

*Concluding sentence: specific focus.*

## The Body

This is where you put together all the parts of your *jigsaw* along with your own analysis of the literature and how it relates to your topic or question. Remember, it is a good idea to start by introducing the broad issues first before getting more specific. It is here that you must develop an integrated argument from all the sources that you have gathered. Linking many arguments together is what makes a good literature review. Look at the following paragraph.

Most early theories of motivation were concerned with need satisfaction. Robbins, Millett, Cacioppe and Waters-Marsh (1998) argued that motivation relies on what a person needs and wants. Similarly the early theories of Maslow and McGregor (cited in Robbins et al., 1998) focused on personal needs and satisfaction as the basis for motivational behaviour. However, recent studies outlined by Leonard, Beauvais, and Scholl (1999) suggest that personality and disposition play an equally important role in motivation. Current thinking does not discount these theories, but builds on them to include a self-concept.

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This is a good example of a body paragraph because it starts with a topic sentence that introduces the main idea of the paragraph (which hopefully follows logically on from the preceding paragraph). It then presents arguments gathered from the literature, both supporting and contrasting. Finally ending with a concluding sentence.

Note - Not all paragraphs need to have contrasting arguments but to include some when appropriate shows you have read widely.

Look how the example paragraph is broken up into its parts.

Most early theories of motivation were concerned with need satisfaction.

*Topic sentence: outlining your main claim or key point for that paragraph.*

Robbins, Millett, Cacioppe and Waters-Marsh (1998) argued that motivation relies on what a person needs and wants. Similarly the early theories of Maslow and McGregor (cited in Robbins et al., 1998) focused on personal needs and satisfaction as the basis for motivational behaviour.

*Supporting evidence from the readings.*

However, recent studies outlined by Leonard, Beauvais, and Scholl (1999) suggest that personality and disposition play an equally important role in motivation.

*Contrasting theories from research.*

Current thinking does not discount these theories, but builds on them to include a self-concept.

*Concluding sentence: linking to next paragraph.*

As well as presenting the information that you have found from the literature you also need to include your own analysis and interpretation of it. Read the following paragraph and see how the arguments have been integrated into the paragraph along with student analysis. Analysis is not just student opinion; it needs to be supported by the literature.

By its very nature, motivation requires a degree of individual satisfaction or narcissism. Robbins et al. (1998) suggest that motivation has as its basis the need to focus on, and please the self. This is supported by Shaw, Shapard and Waugaman (2000) who contend that this narcissistic drive is based upon the human effort to find personal significance in life. It can be argued that the desire to improve one's status is a highly motivating force, and is central to the idea of narcissistic motivation. The narcissistic motivational strategies put forward by Shaw et al. (2000) are concerned with motivation for life in general, but may also have applications in the context of work. These strategies, with their focus on personal needs, demonstrate that narcissism is an essential component of motivation.

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Look at how the example sentence is broken down into its parts.

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It can be argued that the desire to improve one's status is a highly motivating force, and is central to the idea of narcissistic motivation. The narcissistic motivational strategies put forward by Shaw et al. (2000) are concerned with motivation for life in general, but may also have applications in the context of work.

These strategies, with their focus on personal needs, demonstrate that narcissism is an essential component of motivation.

*Topic sentence: outlining your main claim or key point for that paragraph.*

*First statement of evidence from the literature*

*Second statement of evidence from the literature.*

*Student analysis*

*Concluding statement*

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Note - Not all paragraphs need to contain an analysis of the information but to include some when appropriate shows you have been thinking critically about what you have read.

Do not forget, just like an essay, you need to include a one or two paragraph conclusion that sums up the main points that have emerged throughout the body of your literature review.

## Final checklist

### Selection of Sources

- Have you stated the reasons for doing your literature review?
- Have you stayed within reasonable boundaries?
- Why did you include some of the literature and exclude others?
- Have you emphasised recent developments?
- Are your sources credible?
- Is the literature you have selected relevant?

### Critical Evaluation of the Literature

- Have you organised your material according to issues?
- Is there a logic to the way you organised the material?
- Does the amount of detail included on an issue relate to its importance?
- Have you been sufficiently critical of design and methodological issues?
- Have you indicated when results were conflicting or inconclusive?
- Have you indicated the relevance of each reference to your research?

## Reporting verbs

A well written literature review contains many verbs that are used to introduce references. These are called reporting verbs. Reporting verbs can indicate either the author's personal viewpoint, your viewpoint regarding what the author says, and/or the author's viewpoint regarding other literature.

Try to vary your use of these verbs as using the same one too often is boring for the reader.

The following are just some examples of reporting verbs used in literature reviews.

Suggest (that)	Recent studies outlined by Leonard et al (1999) suggest that personality and disposition play an equally important role in motivation.
Argue (that)	Leonard et al (1999) argue that there are three elements of self perception.
Contend(s)	Mullens (1994) contends that motivation to work well is usually related to job satisfaction.
Outline	Recent studies outlined by Mullins (1994) suggest that personality and disposition play an equally important role in motivation.
Focus on	The early theories of Maslow and McGregor (Robbins et al, 1998) focused on personal needs and wants as the basis for motivation.
Define(s)	Eunson (1987, p. 67) defines motivation as 'what is important to you'.
Conclude(s) (that)	Reviewing the results of the case study, Taylor (1980) concludes that the theories of job enrichment and employee motivation do work.
State	He further states that there is an increasing importance on the role of autonomy and self regulation of tasks in increasing motivation.
Maintains (that)	Mullins (1994) maintains that job enrichment came from Herzber's two factor theory.
Found (that)	Mullins (1994) found that there is an increasing importance on the role of autonomy and self regulation of tasks in improving motivation.
Promote(s)	This promotes the idea that tension and stress are important external sources of motivation, which can be eliminated by completing certain tasks.
Establish(ed) (by)	As established by Csikszentmihalyi (Yair 2000, p. 2) 'the more students feel in command of their learning, the more they fulfil their learning potential'.
Asserts (that)	Locke's Goal Setting Theory asserts that setting specific goals tends to encourage work motivation (Robbins et al, 1998).
Show(s)	Various theories of motivation show employers that there are many factors that influence employees work performance.
Claim(s) (that)	Hackman and Oldham (1975) claim that people with enriched jobs, and high scores on the Job Diagnostic Survey, experienced more satisfaction and motivation.
Report(s)	Mullins (1994) reports on four content theories of motivation.
Mention(s)	Mullins (1994) mentions two common general criticisms of Herzberg's theory.
Address	Redesigning jobs so that responsibility moved from supervisors to the workers, was an attempt to address the issues of job satisfaction (Mullins, 1994).

Adapted from RMIT University Study and Learning Centre *Literature review*. Retrieved from [https://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/lsu/content/2\\_AssessmentTasks/](https://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/lsu/content/2_AssessmentTasks/)

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For a PDF guide to writing literature reviews go [HERE](#)

(<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/files/2012/09/Literature-Reviews-The-Writing-Center.pdf>)



For a tutorial on writing literature reviews go [HERE](#)

(<http://emedia.rmit.edu.au/learninglab/content/literature-review-tutorial>)



For more detailed information on writing literature reviews go [HERE](#)

(<http://owl.massey.ac.nz/assignment-types/literature-review.php>)



For a guide on how to identify good academic sources go [HERE](#)

(<http://owl.massey.ac.nz/academic-writing/identifying-academic-sources.php>)



To watch a lecture on writing a literature review go [HERE](#)

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKL2pdRmwc4&noredirect=1#t=37>)



To watch a video that outlines 3 ways to structure a literature review go [HERE](#)

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PU2uqFY-l4s>)



To watch a slideshow on how to find credible online sources go [HERE](#)

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