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Recording link: http://khe2.adobeconnect.com/p38c67xchvv/
What is a Literature Review?

A literature review is a synthesis essay. You write a literature review to see what other people have published on a particular topic in order to determine what is known and yet unknown about the topic.

To do this, you gather enough sources of information on the topic to analyze where there are common subtopics or overlapping themes. You then synthesize your findings in a literature review essay that makes a point about the current state of knowledge on the topic and where more knowledge is needed (which may be where you plan to focus your research in order to fill or explain that gap in the literature).

Oftentimes, a literature review is a section in a larger, original research paper such as a dissertation of published research study to set the background or give context for the original research.
Writing a Literature Review: The first step in writing a literature review is to select a topic and narrow it down, so you can conduct focused research on it.
Consider the difference in scope between the topic of gun control and the topic of the Brady Act’s role in reducing gun violence. You couldn’t actually do a literature review on gun control because there is more literature on it than one could read in a lifetime. By narrowing the topic to one aspect, one issue, one concept, or a particular context, you will be able to find a reasonable amount of sources to represent the existing body of knowledge on the topic and identify where that body of knowledge may be lacking.
Once you have narrowed your topic, the next step is to research it in academic sources such as e-books and journal articles. You have access to thousands of full text e-books and periodicals in the Kaplan University Online library, so that should be your first stop.
You can use one of the general subject databases such as Academic Search Complete or one of the specialized databases for your field of study. You will find there scholarly, credible primary and secondary sources written by experts in the field.
A major characteristic of a literature review is that it is not a summary of all the sources found on a topic. A literature review is a synthesis essay. It synthesizes information found in a variety of sources. To synthesize means to combine or bring together parts to form a whole, like putting together a puzzle. Each source you read is made up of pieces of knowledge. When writing a literature review, you link the pieces between different sources together. You find the pieces that connect and put them together to form a new whole.

The pieces are the different perspectives and subtopics that authors use when talking about a particular topic. As you research your topic, you will find more than a pro and a con side to an issue, for instance. You’ll find a range of perspectives and subtopics. Some of these subtopics may be common in all the articles, others may only be common to some, and others may be unique to one source—this is where the body of knowledge on a topic is lacking or disconnected to the other information. It's where more research, your research, may be needed.

As you read the literature, you are therefore looking for where the pieces connect, where the information overlaps, and where there are gaps.
To find where the information overlaps and where there are gaps, you must recognize the similarities and differences in the content—the subtopics and perspectives—so you can organize the sources into categories that represent the body of knowledge on the topic.

The Writing Center’s sample literature review uses the topic of globalization in online education, which is an aspect of “online education.” The topic of online education is a popular one, but to conduct research on it requires narrowing the focus to one aspect of it. Even “globalization in online education” has an enormous body of literature, so our sample topic was further narrowed down to the definition of globalization in online higher education.

The literature showed different definitions of globalization in online education depending on who was writing on the topic. Some people were using globalization as a multicultural term that as education becomes globalized online, we must learn to understand other cultures. And other authors were using the term globalization in regards to technology and how it impacts online education globally. For the literature review, then, the articles were first grouped into these two categories—the two main perspectives on the definition of globalization in the context of online education.
In order to categorize the sources, you have to read each source looking for those connections, those common and different subtopics, which means you have to read critically. Reading critically involves engaging with what you are reading by annotating your thoughts and questions on the text itself as well as on a separate document during and after you read.

Some during reading strategies include highlighting the parts of the text that you want to return to later. It’s a good idea to read the whole article first and then go back and highlight as you reread it, so you don’t end up highlighting everything. Also, you can color code the highlighting to categorize the different subtopics. If you have printed the file, saved the source as a pdf, or copied the text onto a Word doc, you can also annotate in the margins, writing on it or inserting comment bubbles. In your comments, you can note definitions, summarize main points, and ask questions.

On a separate document, you will also want to record the bibliographic information for each source and pull out quotes that you may want to use in your paper. Just remember to always put quotation marks around any exact wording even if this is just prewriting, so you can remember that was your source’s wording and not your own if you use it in your paper.

As you take notes about each source, you are essentially creating a reading log.
Here is an example of a reading log in the style of an annotated bibliography. An annotated bibliography is not a literature review, however; it’s a tool to help you analyze the literature you are reading. When you begin drafting your paper, you will not be discussing one source then the next. You will be organizing your essay according to the categories you found within the literature and synthesizing the source information to talk about those categories.

However, listing the sources in your reading log will help you manage the information you find in each source and prepare you for the next steps of synthesizing that information.

In this reading log, each entry begins with the bibliographic information about the source, and it’s formatted according to APA guidelines, so it’s ready to go when you begin integrating and citing your sources in your draft.

Next, you summarize the source. It’s best to do this immediately after you read each article rather than trying to remember what it was about after having read five more articles.
In addition to summarizing the article, the reading log is a good place to keep track of the quotes you want to use in your essay and the category the source pertains to. Then you can reorder the journal entries by category. Using our example, everything on globalization and culture would go on the first pages of the journal, and everything on globalization and technology would get moved to the last pages of the journal.

Then when you begin drafting your paper, you will have already thought about where the articles connect and disconnect and how they can be organized. Then, you can use these notes to begin synthesizing the information—putting it together in essay form.
Like every other major paper, a literature review has an introduction, body, and conclusion.

The introduction presents your narrowed topic and the various perspectives you found on it, so readers have an idea of the scope of your research. You cannot cover everything on a topic, so you will want to let your readers know specifically what you’ll be covering, such as the categories you will be covering.

The introduction can also include the questions that came up during your research. This would help start an intelligent conversation about topic, showing that it is much more complicated than one might think. The introduction to a literature review at the graduate level might be one, two, or three paragraphs depending on the subtopics and their complexity. An introduction usually ends with a thesis statement, but a thesis for a literature is not a position. More, it outlines the perspectives and gives the reader the scope of what you will cover in that lit review. It’s objective.

A literature review is informative, not persuasive. You are not persuading your readers to agree with a certain perspective. A literature review is a way for you and your readers to better understand what is known about a topic, so you can
see were you want to go with it or where your research on the topic fits in with the existing body of knowledge.
In the body of the paper, you will be discussing the categories and perspectives that you found in the literature about your topic. In doing this, you will select the sources that provide the richest and most interesting or exemplary information and incorporate quotes and paraphrases from those sources into your discussion to illustrate the category. You will not be mentioning every single source you found in the literature, just the most relevant or representative sources.

Depending on your assignment requirements for the expected length, scope, or number of sources, the body of the paper can be 2 to 20 or 30 pages. The depth of your discussion will also depend on the categories you found, the complexity, overlap, gaps, and how many excerpts and examples from the literature will be needed to illustrate and explain the categories.

In the discussion too, you might need to speak to the credibility of a source if it brings up questions about the research, but you aren’t taking a position. You want to maintain an objective point-of-view throughout the review of literature. The purpose of the discussion is to help you and your reader better understand what is known and yet unknown about a particular topic.
Most people will describe a conclusion as a summary of what you’ve said or a place to highlight one of the main points, but this is not necessarily true for a literature review. Since the literature review is primarily for you, in the conclusion you will want to speak more about the gaps in the research. What has been skipped? The conclusion is where you can suggest that something else should be part of the discussion that no one has written on, for if you’ve done a thorough literature search, you will have found gaps in the research on that topic, and in your conclusion, you can address these missing pieces and the direction your own research will take based on what you have found. So everything goes back to the body and says, this is what I’ve found but it’s missing this, or there is a gap here and this is where I plan to go. The conclusion is therefore also a plan for what do you are going to do with the research.
For an example of a literature review, click the hotspot on the video screen. To review, a literature review is a synthesis essay that focuses on one topic that is narrow enough to be researchable. It’s an informative essay on the body of knowledge that exists on your particular topic. It does not present the information source by source as an annotated bibliography does, however. As you read the literature, you look for the connections between the sources and piece together or synthesize the knowledge according to those connections—the subtopics the sources have in common and the different perspectives on those subtopics. A literature review has an introduction, body, and a conclusion like other academic essays; however, the conclusion typically identifies the gaps in the body of knowledge and where you will take your research. In fact, a literature review is usually a preliminary step in conducting original research. It’s a way for you to analyze what is known and has already been published on a topic, so you can then conduct research that will contribute something new to that body of knowledge.
For more writing support, connect with the KUWC's new public webpage. You can actually Google and find this page. This is also a great way for you to stay connected to the KUWC through Facebook and Twitter. Many of our resources are here as well.
You can also send your research papers to the Kaplan University Writing Center for a review. The best time to do a paper review is after you have written your first draft. When you come to us early, we can help you the most by helping you with the structure of your paper. Many students send papers at the last minute because they want us to simply proofread their paper. However, KUWC writing tutors do not simply proofread the paper for you; we want to help you learn to write and proofread your own papers. You can submit a first draft, and then submit a later draft if you need further help on an assignment.

If you need help before you write the first draft, you can use live tutoring. During live tutoring, you can ask questions and brainstorm with a tutor. Live tutors can help you with other stages in the paper writing process as well. Come visit us. We can be found under the My Studies tab, then under Academic Support Center.
On the main Academic Support Center page, you will see the Writing Center links. These include Live Tutoring, Paper Review Service, the Writing Reference Library, Citation Guidelines, Workshops, English Language Learner, and Fundamental writing help. Notice, you can access the Kaplan Guide to Successful Writing on the right hand side in both print and audio form. Come visit us.
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- Writing Fundamentals Program
- Effective Writing Podcasts Series
- First-Term Student Resources

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Workshops are recorded and recording links, with an accompanying PowerPoint, are posted on the Writing Center Workshop page after the workshop.

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