



How to Write a Literature Review

What is a Literature Review?

A literature review, or lit review, is a paper or a section of a paper that discusses some of the published information in a particular subject area. The “Literature” is a term used in academia to refer to the scholarly articles that have already been written on a particular topic. A lit review, then, is a synthesis of those works.

How is a Lit Review Different from a Research Paper?

The purpose of an academic research paper is to develop a new argument. A lit review, on the other hand, only covers what has already been written by others in the field.

Does this mean that a lit review doesn’t need a thesis? No – a good lit review still needs to be making an argument; this is just an argument about the sources instead of an argument about the topic.

Speaking and Writing Center [1]: Note that a thorough research paper can include a brief review of the literature early on to give the reader an idea of where your research fits in with the existing scholarly discussion. Much of the guidance in this guide would also be relevant to writing the literature review section of a larger paper or an assignment which is wholly a literature review.

Speaking and Writing Center [2]: See Step 2 below for examples.

Step 1: Analyze your Sources

- Identify the contributing argument of each of your sources.
- Look for trends across your sources—is there a general shift way of thinking about a particular topic that you can map? Or perhaps there are multiple subtopics that are relevant to your overarching topic that should be included in your review? Think of trends as key topics that can help you make connections between sources.
- Look for aspects/points that are underdeveloped or gaps in research. Do you notice any areas that seem to have been overlooked by the sources as a whole? Are there theoretical lenses through which we could consider the research differently or demographics whom the research hasn’t been applied to? Where do you see potential for future research to expand?

Speaking and Writing Center [3]: Keep an eye out for places where your sources agree and disagree with one another about key topics or smaller subtopics. Note how researchers writing about a topic are in conversation with one another. Are there things missing in one source that are discussed in another—is one author building on the work of another (whether stated explicitly or not)? What are the major points of conversation that most or all of them talk about—and how is the way they talk about those topics similar or different? These are the kinds of trends you want to take note of.



Step 2: Develop a Thesis

Lit reviews need a thesis just like any other paper. The only difference is that with a lit review you are making an argument about the **literature** rather than the **topic**.

Some examples of lit review thesis statements:

- “The current literature primarily explores the complex interplay between social media usage and its impact on mental health by examining the psychological mechanisms underlying social media interactions, as well as the potential moderators and mediators involved, but there has been relatively little research into the development of evidence-based interventions to promote healthier digital habits and mitigate adverse mental health outcomes associated with excessive social media use.”
- “Exploration of RNA technology in the context of *Drosophila melanogaster* shows that scientists are shifting from traditionalist RNA manipulation methods to more avante-garde, cutting-edge RNA technologies to uncover novel insights into *Drosophila* genetics and molecular biology.”

Speaking and Writing Center [4]: This portion is pointing out the holes in the research in an explanatory way; even though there is something missing, this thesis isn't telling readers where to go with research, but rather explaining the state of the academic conversation.

Speaking and Writing Center [5]: This statement acts as a roadmap for your review; you are centering your review around this shift. Your synthesis of sources will act as evidence that this shift exists, as well as provide examples for the insights in which your thesis alludes to.

Step 3: Body Paragraphs

- Make sure you are **synthesizing** your sources, rather than just summarizing them. Rather than talking about each source independently, draw connections between them all in order to answer or respond to your thesis statement. There is a chance you may use a singular source multiple times throughout your literature review and consequently will have to discuss that source at various points in your paper. It would be hindering to solely talk about a source in one paragraph when it is relevant for a majority of your paper.
- Your paragraphs should cover both support for your argument and the opposing views. In addition, your content in your body paragraphs should include all aspects of the literature that you observed when you first analyzed your sources (i.e., what research is covered? What research still needs to be done? etc.).
- The arguments you make in the body paragraphs should include any trends that you analyzed when you first acquired your sources.

Speaking and Writing Center [6]: A lit review requires you to use all your sources together to form a whole review (which is the synthesis idea). Therefore, you shouldn't give individual accounts for your sources or have body paragraphs dedicated to one source. Your body paragraphs should include multiple sources to show how they all work together to support your claim.

Speaking and Writing Center [7]: In other words, if a point is not connected to your thesis statement, consider replacing the point or rephrasing it to make it relevant. It may also be that your source is no longer relevant to your thesis; you may have to reevaluate sources as you construct your literature review.



Step 4: Conclusion

- In your conclusion, there are two points you will want to hit on:
 - You should revisit your thesis statement. Revisiting the thesis should look like referencing what you have deduced about the subject and answering the following questions: Why does this matter? So what? Why is it important to the overall discussion in the discipline or to a wider audience? You should not be repeating the thesis word-for-word.
 - You should suggest where future literature/research **should go next**.

Ex.: “Along with acknowledging Wordsworth’s influence on British Romantic literature, **more research should be done** on the representation of childhood in Eastern poetry to compare and/or contrast Western and Eastern ideologies on the same concept during the same time period.”

Speaking and Writing Center [8]: Recall the aforementioned underdeveloped/overlooked areas of the field; how should these be addressed? If the lit review is a lead-in to your own research, this conclusion should preview this as a gap you are seeking to address.

Speaking and Writing Center [9]: This conclusion statement reiterates the content on the lit review while pointing out what future researchers should focus on. This example differs from the thesis statement examples because it’s not only explaining what the hole is, but also providing specifics about what future research should be done.