

WRITING A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

WHAT? A review of the literature is a summary of previous research on the issue.

Although it may be written as a separate document, it is usually part of the introduction to a paper. It serves as a background and justification for your paper's focus/proposal/thesis/hypothesis by raising those issues and presenting those findings the reader will need to understand your paper. It should represent all the major perspectives you have come across in your reading.

WHY? The purpose of a review of the literature is to explain *how* the question under investigation (i.e., *your* research question) fits into the larger picture and *why* your question was approached as it was.

HOW? Explain what past research has been done on the issue. Do this by including short summaries of major articles you found, citing sources as you mention them. Focus on the different ways the various sources treat the subject. Show the connections (or lack of) between/among sources. Group similar articles or books together and explain their similarities or explain how one group of articles differs from another. Show how this past work fits together to make your question a logical one to raise, how you will logically enter the ongoing, written "conversation" about your issue. Your final page should list references or works cited.

Note that, because you are not reviewing all possible sources on your subject, a review of the literature presents the student writer's particular synthesis or point of view about previous work.

In sum, a review of the literature has these five characteristics:

1. **Survey** character: demonstrates a range of work and approaches
2. **Synthetic and analytic** character: shows the connections and distinctions between various groups of work
3. **Progressive** character: is concerned with chronological development of ideas and knowledge
4. **Evaluative** character: may critique various lines of work
5. **Future orientation**: opens up possibilities for further work

YOU CAN USE YOUR REVIEW OF LITERATURE TO...

Develop an original perspective about the topic, based on the literature you reviewed. You may

- A) find a new question to ask
- B) discover areas neglected or only partially explored
- C) apply new information/data to reevaluate an old question
- D) if you do not have new information or a new question, take a fresh slant or approach that has not been taken before: see the question from a new perspective, from distance in time; perhaps look at less practical considerations or at new relationships or connections.



Kettler G19 • 481-5740

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Every writer needs a reader.