

“How-to” write a lit review

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We like to think of a lit review as a funnel. We start with broad ideas and bodies of literature and then narrow our focus as we go, weaving together specific pieces. The purpose of a literature review is not merely to summarize but to *synthesize*, putting different bodies of literature in conversation with one another to convey a sense of the broader conversations, debates, and assumptions that exist. Some questions you may find it useful to ask yourself during this process are:

- *What are key concepts in this field? How are they defined? What makes them useful? How do researchers apply them?*
- *What themes/topics seem to be important to researchers in this field, what are they interested in finding out?*
- *Where do scholars disagree? What is the key argument on each side of the debate?*
- *What methods are commonly used by researchers in this field and why are they used?*
- *What is missing from research in this field? What are the gaps?*

The following describes a step-by-step ‘funnel’ process you may find useful for writing a literature review.

1. Start early

Lit reviews require a lot of reading (surprise surprise). To do your due diligence in constructing a complete and credible literature review it’s best to avoid procrastination and get an early start. One strategy when you begin reading is to read and annotate at least 1 paper per day for the purpose your literature review. Persistence and early planning will pay off!

2. Define the scope

Identify what bodies of lit you will be pulling from. Define your individual search terms and be as specific as possible. A great guide to this process is found in Chapter 5 of *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences* by Kristen Luker.

3. Start searching for your literature

Seek other lit reviews early on, as they can be super helpful for getting an overview of the bodies of lit you are looking into. Looking at other lit reviews can also help you identify the key authors, research groups, citations/article in your focus area. Another strategy for initial literature searches is to ask for suggestions from people/peers who may know about that literature.

4. Read and take notes

Read other lit reviews and/or definitional pieces first. Read strategically – you don’t want to read every word of every paper. Find the content that may be most helpful to you, because each paper you read will likely serve a different purpose or fill a different niche. For example, in some papers you may be reading for concepts and definitions, others may apply concepts to case studies on the ground, and others you may find useful as examples of solid methodologies. As you read, follow up on citations from key sentences - this is a great way to find other relevant papers that might not have appeared at the top of a google scholar search.

More tips on reading strategy can be found **SOMEWHERE ELSE IN THIS HANDBOOK.**

5. Build an annotated bibliography

As you take notes on your papers, create an annotated bibliography. Start with a blank word document and add the citation with notes/summary/interesting thoughts underneath. When formatting your notes, write down one sentence that captures the main essence of the article. Keep in mind your objectives when note-taking – don't take notes on every single detail. Distill down what is important. Usually about 2 - 3 citations with notes should fit on one page. It's also a great idea to stay organized with a reference manager and organize papers by topic/theme etc. Reference managers make it smoother to add your citations in writing when you are writing up your lit review.

6. Identify themes & cross over points

Go back through your annotated bib and look for common threads. What is the conversation that scholars are having about this topic? Where do the different bodies of literature intersect or diverge? Identify themes and assign articles to those themes. Some like to do this visually, using a white board or drawing it out on a piece of paper. Usually, organizing your citations this way is a nice transition step toward outlining your literature review.

7. Write

Now that you have your themes and all of your notes in your annotated bibliography, it is not a big step to begin outlining and writing your literature review. When you begin writing, remember to synthesize rather than merely summarize. **Make sure you use your own words when writing and use quotations sparingly.** Quotes are best reserved for definitions of key terms.

Literature reviews should be critical and build an argument that emerges from the literature. What is the uniting point all of these pieces come together to make? Usually, literature reviews are used to make a case for the need for your study, so your argument may also build toward identifying the gaps in the existing literature (and therefore the niche you intend to fill!).