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## **UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY LIBRARY: WHAT IS A LITERATURE REVIEW?**

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### **Summary**

After completing this learning tool, you should be able to:

- Define the purposes of a literature review
- Identify the key features of a literature review
- Locate an example of a literature review

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## WHAT IS A LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review is a critical evaluation of literature published on a particular topic. Literature reviews are different to other types of writing you may have done at University.

### LITERATURE REVIEWS VERSUS ESSAYS

While literature reviews and essays require many of the same skills – for instance, critical thinking skills, academic writing skills and referencing skills – they have different purposes. Whereas essays require you to support your own arguments, literature reviews require you to critique the arguments of others.

### LITERATURE REVIEWS VERSUS ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHIES

While literature reviews and annotated bibliographies both require you to summarise sources, literature reviews involve much more than this. Annotated bibliographies are primarily descriptive, whereas literature reviews are primarily analytical.

Literature reviews and annotated bibliographies are also structured differently. Annotated bibliographies are presented in an alphabetical list format, and each reference is treated separately. In contrast, literature reviews synthesise the ideas contained in each reference, and are structured around a central concept divided by subheadings.

## WHAT ARE THE PURPOSES OF A LITERATURE REVIEW?

Literature reviews serve many purposes. They:

- Provide useful background information to your topic, which enables readers to better understand your topic.
- Demonstrate your knowledge of the subject area.
- Make clear your perspectives on the topic
- Justify your choice of research design. For instance, your choice of qualitative over quantitative approaches, or your method of data analysis.
- Explain how your work will fill in a gap in the scholarly literature.

## WHAT ARE THE KEY FEATURES OF A LITERATURE REVIEW?

Literature reviews require you to *critically evaluate the literature*.

To 'critically evaluate' a source is to scrutinise it to determine its strengths and weaknesses. The following REVIEW criteria will assist you in critically evaluating sources:

### **R is for Relevance**

Does the reference completely cover your topic, or only one aspect of it? Have you read widely to determine how relevant it is in relation to other sources?

### **E is for Expertise of author**

What is the educational background of the author? What are their qualifications? Are they writing in their area of expertise? Are they regularly cited by other authors in the field?

### **V is for Viewpoint of author/organisation**

Does the author have any personal or professional affiliations that may bias their work? Has the research been sponsored by an organisation with a vested interest in the topic? What is the purpose of the source – to inform, persuade or entertain?

### **I is for Intended audience**

Is the reference aimed at the general public or a scholarly audience? Is it intended for professionals in the field or a community of researchers? Is it intended for a large or small readership?

### **E is for Evidence**

Are opinions supported by scholarly evidence? Is a particular referencing style used properly and consistently? Has the reference been subjected to peer review?

### **W is for When published**

Was the reference published recently? Have significant developments been made in the subject area since the reference was published?

## FOCUS ON KEY PUBLICATIONS

Contrary to what many people assume, literature reviews do not require you to include *everything* that has been written on your topic. Not only is this impractical, it is not useful to people reading your literature review!

Your focus should be on publications that have made a big impact on the field. If a reference has been cited numerous times by other reputable authors, it is fair to assume that it is a key publication. It is also important to include recent publications to show that you are up to date with ideas and developments in the field.

## LOOK AT THE 'BIG PICTURE'

Although literature reviews often involve analysing small details of a reference, it is important to always keep your eye on the big picture. Make sure you provide a comprehensive overview of the topic for your readers – point out who the leading theorists are, what the key publications have been, and any gaps in the research (areas that have been neglected by researchers).

Writing a literature review is like assembling a puzzle –you need to figure out how each piece fits together as well as whether there are any missing pieces. It is only by completing the puzzle that the overall topic becomes clear.

## INCLUDE A RANGE OF SOURCES

To demonstrate you've read widely you should include a range of sources. Any type of reference can be included in a literature review provided it is relevant to your topic and of a high quality. Depending on your topic, you may include books, journal articles, websites, conference proceedings, government reports, and even media reports.

## SAY SOMETHING NEW!

When writing a literature review it is important to say something new about your topic. Either examine a topic that has never been written about before (this is quite rare) or look at an old topic in a new way. No one will be interested in your literature review if it simply rehashes old knowledge.

## STATE YOUR CONTRIBUTION TO THE LITERATURE

It is not enough to critically evaluate the literature – you must make clear how your interpretation of the literature extends and enriches our understanding of the topic. This step is the one most often neglected by researchers!

## HOW CAN I FIND AN EXAMPLE OF A LITERATURE REVIEW?

The best way to find an example of a literature review is to search a database in your subject area. Do a keyword search for 'review' in the document title, or limit your search by document type.

The screenshot shows the ProQuest Advanced Search interface. At the top, there are navigation tabs for 'Basic', 'Advanced', 'Topics', 'Publications', and 'My Research'. The 'Advanced' tab is selected. The search query is 'radium or radiation or radioactiv\*' and the search scope is 'Document title'. The document type is limited to 'Literature review'. The interface includes a 'Go' button and a 'Logout | Help' link. Below the search area, there are options for 'Database', 'Date range', and 'Limit results to'. The 'More Search Options' section includes fields for 'Publication title', 'Subject', 'Company/Org', 'Person', 'Location', 'Classification code', 'NAICS/SIC code', 'Document feature', 'Document language', and 'Document type'.

## HOW CAN I FIND INFORMATION ON HOW TO WRITE A LITERATURE REVIEW?

The library has many books on how to write literature reviews.

Do a keyword search for 'writ\*' and "literature review\*" in the title field of the library catalogue.

The screenshot shows the University of Sydney Library search results page. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the University of Sydney logo and the word 'LIBRARY'. Below this is a secondary navigation bar with links for 'LIBRARY', 'UNIVERSITY HOME', 'ASK A LIBRARIAN', and 'SITEMAP'. A third navigation bar contains various service links: 'catalogue', 'databases and electronic resources', 'borrowing', 'libraries', 'subject guides', 'information skills', and 'about the library'. On the right side of this bar, there are links for 'MyLibrary Login' and 'Help'.

The main search area features a search bar with the text 'KEYWORD' and the search terms 'writ\*' and 'literature review\*'. The search results indicate '298 results found. Sorted by relevance | date | title'. Below the search bar are buttons for 'Start Over', 'Modify', and 'New Search', along with a '[Search History]' dropdown menu. There are also buttons for 'Save Marked Records' and 'Save All On Page'.

The search results are displayed in a list format. The first result is 'Writing literature reviews : a guide for students of the social and behavioral sciences' by Galvan, Jose L., published in Glendale, CA by Pycszak Publishing in 2006. The item location is 'Health Sciences, Nursing'. The second result is 'Analyzing the past to prepare for the future: Writing a literature review.' by Webster, Jane, which is an electronic item. The third result is 'Writing papers in psychology : a student guide to research reports, literature reviews, proposals, posters, and handouts' by Rosnow, Ralph L., published in Australia and Belmont, CA by Thomson/Wadsworth in 2006. The item location is 'Health Sciences'.

On the right side of the page, there are several sections of links: 'Search Options' (Keyword, Advanced Search, Title, Author, Journal, Subject, Call number, ISBN/ISSN, Author and Title, Music publisher number, Library classes), 'Find Reserve Items' (Unit of Study, Lecturer), 'MyLibrary Options' (MyLibrary login, Pay library fines, About Document Delivery), and 'Library Links' (Ask a Librarian, Missing items, Suggestions for the collection, Special Collections, Libraries Australia and other library catalogues, Search catalogue via your mobile/PDA, New titles).