

What is a Literature Review?

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As part of your dissertation, thesis, or research paper, you may be asked to include a “review of the literature” or “literature review.” You may even be asked to write a literature review as a standalone assignment. But what exactly does that mean? To answer that question, let’s first talk about what we mean by “The literature.”

“The literature” refers to a published collection of written knowledge on or related to a particular subject. This may include things like scholarly articles, books, reports, or other types of written works. Their format all depends on the topic of your paper, dissertation, or thesis.

A literature review is not just a summary of these writings; it’s also a critical analysis of the state of research on your chosen topic. A good literature review provides context for your own research. It summarizes the state of existing research on your topic; helps identify gaps in the literature; provides a theoretical foundation for your research; and situates your own work within the existing body of written knowledge. It helps readers and other scholars understand why your research matters. To create a good literature review, you’ll need to determine its scope. Consider the concepts, theories, and studies you’ll want to include. You can search different library and non-library resources to find written works to include in your literature review, focusing on the key concepts, theories, and authors important to your research.

As you research, you’ll eventually reach a point where you start seeing the same articles, books, or other sources showing up again and again in your search results or in the works cited sections of sources you read. This is usually a good sign! It means you’ve likely reached a point where you can stop actively searching for new material and start constructing your review.

You’ll need to read and evaluate all of your sources to determine whether or not to include them in your literature review. When including them, think beyond just summarizing to synthesizing what you’ve learned. How do these sources fit together? Do any contradict one another? Do certain studies build on others? How are they setting a path forward for your own research?

Considering all of these questions will help you create a literature review that situates your own research within the scholarly conversation of your subject area.

Remember that help is always available for you as you work on your literature review. You can contact the UH Libraries for research help or the UH Writing Center for writing help.