Literature Reviews

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1. Why review the literature?

In a literature review, you summarise and critically analyse what has been found, attempted or argued on a specific topic and, often, suggest what could still be explored. You bring together the studies you review by synthesising the findings, arguments and/or methodologies that relate to your topic, and by identifying any relevant points of difference or areas of debate. Your purpose for doing all this is often to help you to answer a research question. If you are conducting research, your literature review shows that your research is original but builds on existing research.

2. Different types of review

Traditional ('narrative') review: This is commonly used in a research report, thesis or proposal, where its purpose is to locate your research in the context of current knowledge. By presenting a thorough overview and critical analysis of existing research as it relates to your focus, you develop an argument, or narrative, that your research is worth doing.

Standalone review: This usually provides an overview of what is known about a particular topic but may not identify an area for further research. It is often set as an assignment, and you may be given specific instructions on the focus and/or sources to review. One standalone type is the systematic literature review. This is regarded as a scientific enquiry with reproducible methods. It employs search criteria defined to answer a research question and uses fixed methods of analysing the literature, which all need to be reported.

3. Finding material and taking notes

Most reviews discuss only academic literature, although in some disciplines it may be relevant to review publications from governments, NGOs and/or industry. Unless you are conducting a systematic literature review or you have specific instructions from your lecturer, your topic and the size of your project will determine the approximate number of sources you should review. To ensure you achieve coverage of the most relevant literature to a manageable extent, you need to put some parameters in place: define your topic precisely, identify the most influential studies on your topic, and concentrate on recent studies, except where you trace the development of research over time or where landmark publications remain significant. When you conduct your literature search,

- set a research question and ask, 'How have other researchers addressed this or related questions?'
- ask your subject librarian for advice on using publication databases to find sources
- start with recent tertiary (e.g., textbooks) and/or secondary sources (e.g., review articles), as they summarise existing research and describe its significance in the field, before you seek primary sources (i.e., original research); this will help you find the most important up-to-date literature first
- look up literature cited in items you find useful

For each item you read, describe in your own words:

- the focus
- the writer's main argument or findings
- the strengths and weaknesses, or accomplishments and limitations (see 'Evaluating' section below)
- the relevance of this item to your own research

Do not waste time on material that is not directly relevant to your focus; you may not need to read each item from start to finish. To save time, keep full bibliographic details of all sources, including page numbers of information you accessed. In the 'Additional resources' section at the bottom of the Academic Skills Centre's Literature Reviews page on AKO | LEARN, you will find an Excel spreadsheet that is designed to help you manage all your sources, and a guide to finding literature through the UC Library.

4. Synthesis and structure

Synthesis is the key to an intelligently structured literature review. It means, where possible, that you discuss multiple sources at once by relating them to a common theme. By doing this, you show that you have an extensive knowledge of your area and can categorise the literature into a manageable number of key themes. Synthesis also helps your reader to see relationships between the sources you review. Do not discuss each source one by one, as the result will be disjointed and will not give an effective overview of the topic.

Structure

Introduction: This should state the purpose of your literature review and convince the reader that your topic is important. It should also outline the main themes covered, preferably in the order you present them in the body of the review.

Method: Only use this in a systematic literature review, or if your lecturer instructs you to do so.

Body: This is the bulk of your review. Divide it into sections covering different themes, and use a heading for each section. Each body paragraph normally makes one point relevant to multiple sources, which is stated in a sentence at or near the start of the paragraph. See Paragraph A in the 'Writing tips' section below for an example.

Conclusion: This should briefly summarise your main observations and arguments about how well the literature contributes to knowledge on your topic, and, if your review is part of a thesis or other research project, to what extent it addresses your research question. That will involve revealing an area that merits further research.

5. Evaluating

In a literature review, you are usually expected to evaluate the research, both by demonstrating its relevance to your research question and by critiquing the quality of the studies. Evaluating involves identifying a source's strengths and weaknesses, such as in logic, argument, design or evidence. It can mean recognising what a study has accomplished, and what is significant about that for your research question. It can also mean identifying a study's limitations. A limitation is not necessarily a flaw in the research: often it will be something that was not done but which you believe it would be beneficial to investigate. Authors frequently identify limitations of their research themselves, which you may wish to use as a starting point for your own evaluations. When you are conducting your own research, evaluating literature can help you to identify questions that have not been answered – or not answered satisfactorily – and to justify your decision to research those.

6. Writing tips

The style of writing in literature reviews can differ according to discipline. The best way to understand how to write them is to read published literature reviews in your field. Always follow any instructions given by your lecturer or supervisor.

Summarise

It is best to summarise information as concisely as possible. When discussing a source, only mention what is relevant to your focus. This can mean you omit details about context or method if you focus on findings or argument. Group together sources when you can say the same thing about them. For example,

> Several studies have used observational data to predict the foot-hairiness of hobbit offspring (Proudfoot et al., 2005; Baggins & Gamgee, 2012; Baggins et al., 2014), while Brandybuck et al. (2018) and Brandybuck and Took (2020) have identified possible genetic markers associated with hobbit-foot hairiness.

Focus on the literature

In most cases, your task is not to explain your understanding of the topic itself, but to discuss *what the literature says about that topic*. Of the two paragraphs below, A is written in the style of a literature review, but B is not: notice that B answers the question 'How should hobbit culture be defined?', while A answers the question, 'How have other researchers defined hobbit culture?' To ensure you are focusing on the literature, it is a good idea to use words like 'research', 'studies' and 'authors' as subjects in your sentences. In Paragraph A, these subjects and their verbs are in bold.

> *Paragraph A: typical*
> While **most research** on hobbit culture **focuses** on intrinsic characteristics, **a few studies identify** its markers by comparison with other Middle Earth cultures. **Most of these define** hobbit values in their opposition to those of orc populations (Baggins, 2018; Brandybuck & Took, 2019; Gamgee et al., 2022), while **Oakenshield** (2020) **describes** hobbit lifestyles through points of similarity and difference with elven and dwarven practices. **These studies** each **frame** hobbit culture contextually, arguing that cultural identity is most strongly articulated by relating it to external points of reference.

> *Paragraph B: not typical*
> It is useful to compare hobbit culture with other Middle Earth cultures rather than merely describing it by its intrinsic characteristics. Hobbit values, for example, may be defined by how unlike those of orc populations they are (Baggins, 2018; Brandybuck & Took, 2019), while hobbit lifestyles are better understood by recognising their similarities and differences with elven and dwarven practices (Oakenshield, 2020). Arguably, cultural identity is most strongly articulated by relating it to external points of reference (Baggins, 2018; Brandybuck & Took, 2019; Oakenshield, 2020), which is why it is important to frame hobbit culture contextually.

In some cases, literature reviews focus on the findings of research rather than on researchers and studies. This approach is common in the physical sciences where it is typical to review a large number of studies, some of which contribute very particular, but nevertheless important, findings to the field. For example,

> Modelling the variation in the lava flows of Mount Doom presents challenges. Increases in the effusion rate may be triggered by seemingly random events such as the wrath of Sauron (Gimli & Legolas, 2017; Saruman et al., 2012b) or the proximity of hobbits (Gandalf, 2013; Gandalf & Baggins, 2014; Gollum et al., 2018). Some success in measuring the actual output has been achieved by in-situ monitoring, but only when the Nazgûl are not present (Gamgee et al., 2017).

Use the right tense

Different verb tenses have different meanings. In some cases they are effectively interchangeable, but the following are some general guidelines. You can learn more about tenses on the Academic Skills Centre's English Language Learning Resources page on AKO | LEARN.

Past simple tense. Use this for reporting actions or conditions that occurred at a fixed point in the past, such as steps taken in a research method or results obtained from it. For example,

> Proudfoot et al. (2005) **gathered** pictorial evidence and **correlated** it with genealogical records.

Present perfect tense. Use this for reporting actions or conditions that began in the past and continue to have effect or validity in the present (first example below), or that allow the possibility of repeating the action, which usually occurred in the recent past (second example below):

> Brandybuck and Took (2020) **have identified** possible genetic markers of hobbit-foot hairiness.
> *(They remain possible genetic markers until proven otherwise.)*

> Several studies **have used** observational data to predict the foot-hairiness of hobbit offspring.
> *(More researchers could still viably use the same method today.)*

Present simple tense. Use this for statements of fact, theory or argument that apply at any time. These include statements that interpret research findings or discuss texts (as distinct from the research they present). For example,

> This finding **suggests** that the onset of foot-hair loss in hobbits **is** preventable.

> These three studies **argue** that hobbit cultural identity **draws** on both internal and external factors.