

Learning Commons

Academic Writing Center - Graduate Students



Literature Review

4 Steps to Composing a Literature Review

Step 1: Check out some published literature reviews in your field to get an idea of what's expected:

Visit annualreviews.org for hundreds of examples from a wide range of fields. You can also find examples by going to the library's homepage (libraries.uc.edu), clicking on the "Advanced Search" tab, and setting parameters to include "literature review" in the title section and your topic in the subject terms section.

Step 2: Assess the credibility and relevance of your sources:

Consider the following questions about the author, publication, and argument:

Author: Are they an expert? What are their credentials? What have they published? What positions have they held?

Publication: What is the reputation of the publication? Is it a biased source? Who is their audience? Is the publication often cited?

Argument: Is the argument logical? Is it backed up by credible evidence? Are unfounded assumptions made?

After assessing the reliability, consider whether the literature is relevant to your own work. Does it contribute to a better understanding of the subject? Does it answer questions? Does it raise any questions?

Step 3: Organize your research by creating a matrix:

A matrix can also help you see how all the literature is related and where there may be gaps in research. You can organize your matrix in different ways, but the example to the right is particularly useful for figuring out research questions and overarching themes.

	Source 1	Source 2	Source 3
Discipline			
Evidence			
Methodology			
Critical/Theoretical Concepts			
Conclusions/Answers			

Step 4: Write an easy-to-follow literature review that synthesizes your sources:

Follow a structure laid out in your thesis and include topic sentences that tie back to your thesis at the beginning of each paragraph. Always identify your sources (even when paraphrasing). Avoid only summarizing your sources – instead explain how they are relevant to your research question, and/or how they relate to the other literature you've read.

Further Resources:

The following universities have helpful guides for writing literature reviews:
The Writing Center at UNC-Chapel Hill
The Writing Center at The University of Wisconsin – Madison
VCU Libraries Research Guides

The Academic Writing Center
401N Langsam Library
Phone: 513-556-3912, uc.edu/awc

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