

So you've been assigned to write a literature review. The first time they're assigned to write a lit review, many students will find this type of essay alarming or difficult because it's unlike any other kind of academic writing.

As you're getting started, the first question you'll want to clarify is,

What exactly is a literature review?

Essentially, a **lit review** is an examination of the existing literature on a topic. It pulls in many sources, summarizes them, and synthesizes them into an overview of the current academic conversation.

It is often one section of a longer research paper, not a freestanding document.

Lit reviews have a few purposes:

- To **provide background and context** for a piece of research
- To demonstrate familiarity with the **academic conversation** in a given field
- To **open up gaps** in the knowledge base, which will be filled by your new research
 - Therefore, to **justify** this new research

A lit review is NOT:

- **An argument.** Instead of putting forth new information, a lit review engages with information that already exists. It may open up questions, but it does not seek to answer them.
- **An annotated bibliography.** A lit review goes beyond simply listing sources and engaging with one at a time. It synthesizes many sources into something coherent, which gives a sense of the general conversation in the field and contextualizes a specific piece of research.

Ok, so that's what a lit review is. Now... ***How do I actually write one?***

1. Gather useful sources •

- **Familiarize yourself with your topic.** Look at the prominent figures, not the small players. Since you're trying to give a sense of the general conversation in the field, the most significant voices in your field are the first ones to look at.
- **Types of sources you may consult:**
 - i. Key sources that theorize or originate the topic you're exploring
 - ii. Specific research that contains empirical findings in support of your topic
 - iii. Related sources that may not be about your exact topic, but which are significant to your study

2. Organize your information into groups •

Don't just create a list of sources. Communicate your information in logical, meaningful units that relate to your research topic.

- **Chronological.** This is one of the most common organizational strategies for a lit review. Begin in the past and build up with the major developments in your topic, to create a sense of what the conversation has been and what past influences inform it.
- **Topical/Thematic.** Organize your information by subject or theme. Are there subtopics to your research topic that lend themselves to a thematic grouping?

3. Summarize and cite •

- **Give concise, accurate summaries.** Pulling the important information out of your sources, give a short, clear sense of what each source says and how it fits into the field's broader conversation.
- **Always cite your information.** A lit review will be full of citations, way more than other types of essays, since the purpose is not to add your work to the field, but instead to review the work that already exists.
- **Don't analyze.** The only thing you're adding to the extant literature is the suggestion that it is incomplete and that new research needs to be done. You may evaluate the value of your sources, but do not create an argument and use the literature to prove your point. **This is not an argumentative research paper.** It is only a synthesis of the existing conversation on your topic, and a suggestion that your own research is necessary based on a gap in that conversation.

4. Meet with your professor/advisor •

No two lit reviews look the same. They are organized in different ways, follow different formats depending on the academic field, and emphasize different purposes. These are the basics, but asking your professor or advisor is the best way to make sure your lit review is effective for your specific needs.