

Writing and Tutorial Center

Graduate Thesis: Literature Review Basics

In a literature review you are demonstrating your knowledge of previous writing on themes and concepts related to your thesis. Not all of this previous writing will necessarily be directly addressing your thesis topic. In fact, depending on your thesis, there may not be any direct literature on your topic! In some instances, *how* you address that previous literature will connect everything together in a new way. For example, if you were writing a thesis on “The Flower Market Trade in New York City”, you might find direct literature written by experts about this exact topic. If not, or in addition to, you could likely find scholarly articles, books, or book chapters on the flower market in general that you could then apply to New York City in your literature review.

Remember, even if others have written about your topic or about similar topics the research that you do will still be new research, guided in part by previous research, but brought to new directions based on your new research on the topic.

WHAT IS A LITERATURE REVIEW?

In the context of a master's or doctoral thesis, the term “literature review” generally refers to the section of the thesis document wherein the writer addresses existing scholarship that bears a direct relation to their thesis topic. It is usually a separate chapter, often the first chapter after the introduction, and it aims to situate the thesis within ongoing discourse within the discipline, and often in relation to other disciplines that may help illuminate the thesis topic as well.

SPECIFIC PURPOSES

When preparing a literature review, it is important to reflect on the specific purposes it will serve in the context of a larger thesis. One could be to show how you arrived at the thesis you are proposing by tracing the roots of the ideas it is based on through the work of other scholars in your field. Another could be to show the absence of work in your field on the specific topic you are interested in, or the incompleteness/inadequacy of existing scholarship on your topic. In either case, it assumes you have read widely on your topic, and in particular it requires that you show your familiarity with other scholars in your discipline whose work is relevant to yours. This is the standard requirement of post-graduate work in all disciplines.

SELECTION

Think carefully about which scholars you choose to address in your literature review. The general rule should be, if it is relevant, include it, and if you choose not to, you should have a good reason. Two criteria are helpful: the proximity of the work in question to your own, and the importance of the work within the discipline as a whole. So if one of the pioneers of your field mentions your topic, you probably want to address that. If there is a little known scholar whose work is very closely related to yours, include it. Think too about what readings have been useful to you personally, opened your eyes about something you were unaware of, or challenged your thinking in a helpful way. With that said, most if not all of your sources should be scholarly, which is to say, written by experts in the field and published in peer reviewed journals, or by respected academic publishers. Newspaper articles, blogs, and other non-peer reviewed and non-academic sources may be used in specific instances where they can be considered relevant to your thesis topic, but they are not a replacement for peer reviewed academic sources and should be used sparingly.

ORGANIZATION

There are a number of ways a literature review can be organized. The easiest and perhaps the most logical for many thesis students is the chronological method, beginning with the earliest scholarship on the topic and moving through time to the most recent work at the end. This has the benefit of reading like a story, or a history of the development of ideas. For some, though, it may make more sense to organize the literature review thematically, on the basis of concepts that are essential to the larger thesis, or even of separate disciplines, when the thesis requires the integration of work from more than one. In this case, it's best to start with the broader concepts and funnel into those ideas which are most directly relevant to the thesis research.

The choice between these two methods of organization is an important one, and if there is any doubt, it's worth trying both until one seems more appropriate than the other.

TIPS

Things to ask yourself as you prepare and write this document should include:

Who has conducted research on the topic(s) or theme(s) I am interested in?

What are the major concepts, arguments, and/or problems that this body of research presents?

Is there something like a consensus around how an area of study is understood or interpreted?

Are there contending interpretations or arguments around how that area is understood, and if so, what are they?

How and in what ways do I seek to relate this existing research to my eventual thesis—including what possible follow-up research may be necessary to proceed given the outcome of this preliminary review?

Please note—the Writing Center should **not** be taken as the primary/final authority when it comes to graduate thesis requirements. As always, be sure to consult your department's thesis guidelines or speak to your advisor(s) if you have specific format or content questions regarding the literature review.