

Literature Review

300-level course writing requirement

Requirements

- Topic must relate to the content of the course (professor may specify the types of questions/content allowed)
- A minimum of 6 references should be used
- References must be peer-reviewed research articles

The APA Publication Manual indicates the requirements of any review article are

- Describe and refine a research question
- Review prior studies covering the issue (i.e. what is known about it)
- Designate relationships among relevant variables or constructs, highlight contradictory findings, and point out issues requiring further investigation
- Provide a concrete suggestion about how research should proceed to address the issue or how the research can be applied

Thaiss & Sandford (2000) indicate a good student written review paper has three basic parts

- Topic overview- statement of topic and purpose of review
- Bulk of paper-Review of specific topics drawn from critical reading of existing literature
- Closing section-critical assessment of conclusions drawn from review and recommendations for future research

Other guidelines

- Research studies should be reviewed by topic, not alphabetical or chronological order
- Should use clear headings and subheadings to organize the literature for readers
- The paper should be written in paper format, not annotated format. I.e. research should be cited in text, rather than including the entire reference in the body of the paper
- A title page and reference page should be used formatted according to APA style.

Guidelines for writing a literature review

by Helen Mongan-Rallis. Last updated: November 17, 2006

[*Note: For these guidelines, some sections have been quoted directly from: Galvan, J. (2006). Writing literature reviews: a guide for students of the behavioral sciences (3rd ed.). Glendale, CA: Pyczak Publishing.*]

WHAT IS A LITERATURE REVIEW?

A literature review is *not* an annotated bibliography in which you summarize briefly each article that you have reviewed. While a summary of what you have read is contained within the literature review, it goes well beyond merely summarizing professional literature. It focuses on a *specific* topic of interest and includes a critical analysis of the relationship among different works. It may be written as a stand-alone paper or to provide a theoretical framework and rationale for a research study (such as a thesis or dissertation).

STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

These guidelines are adapted primarily from Galvan (2006). Galvan outlines a very clear, step-by-step approach that is very useful to use as you write your review.

In addition to using the step-by-step guide that is provided below, it is recommended that you (a) locate examples of literature reviews in your field of study and skim over these to get a feel for what a literature review is and how these are written and (b) read over other literature reviews so that you see different perspectives and approaches.

Step 1: Review APA guidelines

Read through the links provided below on APA guidelines so that you become familiar with the common core elements of how to write in APA style: in particular, pay attention to general document guidelines (e.g. font, margins, spacing), title page, abstract, body, text citations, quotations.

Step 2: Decide on a topic

The topic must be related to course materials for your specific 300 level courses, and you will want to be sure there is enough research on this topic. Your instructor can help you choose an appropriate topic.

Step 3: Identify the literature that you will review:

Familiarize yourself with online databases. Using relevant databases (such as PsychArticles and PsychInfo), search for literature articles. Some tips for identifying suitable literature and narrowing your search:

- Start with a general descriptor from the database thesaurus or one that you know is already a well-defined descriptor based on past work that you have done in this field.
- Redefine your topic if needed. As you search you will quickly find out if the topic that you are reviewing is too broad. Try to narrow it to a specific area of interest within the broad area that you have chosen.
- As part of your search, be sure to identify landmark or classic studies and theorists as these provide you with a framework/context for your study.

Step 4: Analyze the literature

Once you have identified and located the articles for your review, you need to analyze them and organize them before you begin writing (this is the time when having completed an annotated bibliography on the topic is useful). Some things to keep in mind:

- Overview the articles: Skim the articles to get an idea of the general purpose and content of the article (focus your reading on the abstract, introduction, first few paragraphs, and the conclusion of each article).
- Group the articles into categories (e.g. into topics and subtopics and chronologically within each subtopic)
- Take notes: Decide on the format in which you will take notes as you read the articles. Some tips are to:
 - Define key terms: look for differences in the way keys terms are defined (note these differences).
 - Note key statistics that you may want to use in the introduction to your review.
 - Select useful quotes that you may want to include in your review. If you copy the exact words from an article, be sure to cite the page number as you will need this should you decide to use the quote when you write your review (as direct quotes must always be accompanied by page references).
 - *Note: although you may collect a large number of quotes during the note-taking phase of your review, when you write the review, use quotes very sparingly. The rule to follow is to quote only when some key meaning would be lost in translation if I were to paraphrase the original author's words, or if using the original words adds special emphasis to a point that I am making.*
- Note emphases, strengths & weaknesses: Since different research studies focus on different aspects of the issue being studied, each article that you read will have different emphases, strengths, and weaknesses. Your role as a reviewer *is* to evaluate what you read, so that your review is not a mere description of different articles, but rather a critical analysis that makes sense of the collection of articles that you are reviewing. Critique the research methodologies used in the studies, and distinguish between assertions (the author's opinion) and actual research findings (derived from empirical evidence).
- Identify major trends or patterns: As you read a range of articles on your topic, you should make note of trends and patterns over time as reported in the literature. This step requires you to synthesize and make sense of what you read, since these patterns and trends may not be spelled out in the literature, but rather become apparent to you as you review the big picture that has emerged over time. Your analysis can make generalizations across a majority of studies, but should also note inconsistencies across studies and over time.
- Identify gaps in the literature: The key is to reflect on why gaps in the literature might exist (based on the understandings that you have gained by reading literature in this field of study). These gaps will be important for you to address as you plan and write your review.

- Identify relationships among studies: Note relationships among studies, such as which studies were landmark ones that led to subsequent studies in the same area. You may also note that studies fall into different categories (categories that you see emerging or ones that are already discussed in the literature). When you write your review, you should address these relationships and different categories and discuss relevant studies using this as a framework.
- Keep your review focused on your topic: make sure that the articles you find are relevant and directly related to your topic. As you take notes, record which specific aspects of the article you are reading are relevant to your topic (as you read you will come up with key descriptors that you can record in your notes that will help you organize your findings when you come to write up your review)
- Evaluate your references for coverage: Although you can always find more articles on your topic, you have to decide at what point you are finished with collecting new resources so that you can focus on writing up your findings. However, before you begin writing, you must evaluate your reference list to ensure that it is up to date and has reported the most current work. Typically a review will cover the last five years, but should also refer to any landmark studies prior to this time if they have significance in shaping the direction of the field. If you include studies prior to the past five years that are *not* landmark studies, you should defend why you have chosen these rather than more current ones.

Step 5: Synthesize the literature prior to writing your review

Using the notes that you have taken, develop an outline of your final review. The following are the key steps as outlined by Galvan (2006, p71-79)

Important: A literature review is *not* a series of annotations (like an annotated bibliography). Galvan (2006, p72) captures the difference between an annotated bibliography and a literature review very well: "...in essence, like describing trees when you really should be describing a forest. In the case of a literature review, you are really creating a new forest, which you will build by using the trees you found in the literature you read."

* Create a topic outline that traces your argument: first explain to the reader your line or argument (or thesis); then your narrative that follows should explain and justify your line of argument.

* Reorganize your notes according to the path of your argument. Within each topic heading, note differences among studies, look for obvious gaps or areas needing more research, and make a plan to describe relevant theories and discuss how individual studies relate to and advance theory

* Plan to summarize periodically and, again near the end of the review. Plan to present conclusions and implications and suggest specific directions for future research near the end of the review.

Step 6: Writing the review (Galvan, 2006; pp. 81-90)

Early in the review, indicate why the topic being reviewed is important. Distinguish between research finding and other sources of information. Indicate why certain studies are important. If citing a classic or landmark study, identify it as such. If a landmark study was replicated, mention that and indicate the results of the replication. Make sure to refer the reader to other reviews on issues that you will not be discussing in details.

Added Advice: Justify comments such as, "no studies were found", whenever necessary. Avoid long lists of nonspecific references. If the results of previous studies are inconsistent or widely varying, cite them separately. Cite all relevant references in the review section of thesis, dissertation, or journal article

Step 7: Developing a coherent essay (Galvan, 2006: 91-96)

If your review is long, provide an overview near the beginning of the review. Also, at the beginning of a review, state explicitly what will and will not be covered. Specify your point of view early in the review: this serves as the thesis statement of the review.

Aim for a clear and cohesive essay that integrates the key details of the literature and communicates your point of view (a literature is not a series of annotated articles). Use subheadings, especially in long reviews. Use transitions to help trace your argument

Write a conclusion for the end of the review. Provide closure so that the path of the argument ends with a conclusion of some kind. How you end the review, however, will depend on your reason for writing it. If the review was written to stand alone, as is the case of a term paper or a review article for publication, the conclusion needs to make clear how the material in the body of the review has supported the assertion or proposition presented in the introduction. On the other hand, a review in a thesis, dissertation, or journal article presenting original research usually leads to the research questions that will be addressed.

Reference:

Galvan, J. (2006). *Writing literature reviews: a guide for students of the behavioral sciences* (3rd ed.). Glendale, CA: Pycszak Publishing.

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