

ACE Quick Guide to Writing a Literature Review

What is a Literature Review?

The aim of a literature review is to **identify and discuss scholarly literature relevant to your dissertation topic** and research questions. You are required to demonstrate an understanding of how your project builds upon existing research in your field, **critically evaluating its strengths and limitations**.

How Do I Conduct a Literature Review?

1. Identify your dissertation topic and/or define the problem

The topic of your dissertation, which may be a research question or problem, should be clearly identified and defined before you begin your literature search.

At this stage, it is helpful to **produce a clear and concise summary of the research question**, problem, or topic that you will be reviewing, **generating a list of synonyms and keywords** that could be **used to search for relevant literature**.



2. Conduct your literature search

Use your list of synonyms and keywords to **search for literature in academic databases** such as Google Scholar, IEEE Explore or CMI ManagementDirect. **Assess the credibility and relevance of potential resources by applying the CRAAP Test** (California State University-Chico, 2010), recording what you have read and where it can be accessed.

Try to **locate a wide range of quality resources**, authored by experts in your field. For example: chapters in edited collections, conference papers and peer-reviewed journal articles.



3. Evaluate your chosen resources, keeping detailed notes

When evaluating a scholarly resource, it is important to **ask meaningful questions** – considering its strengths and limitations rather than accepting the information at face value. The descriptive, analytical, and evaluative questions proposed by the **Critical Thinking Model** (University of Leeds, 2023) offer a basic framework. During this stage, you should **keep detailed, well-organised notes**. For additional support, see the [ACE Quick Guide to Cornell Notetaking](#).



4. Reflect on your research, producing an outline

Before drafting your literature review, it is helpful to reflect on the reading you have completed. Are there any **significant trends**? Have you identified **relevant disparities, contradictions, or alternatives** proposed by the wider academic community? Are there any **unresolved questions or gaps in the existing research**? How will your study resolve these questions or fill this gap?

As you look over your notes, think about how you will arrange your research in the literature review and produce an outline. You may organise your literature review **thematically** by grouping related studies.



5. Write your review, allotting time for editing and proofreading

Use the outline to **draft your literature review**, breaking it down into small, manageable tasks. Keep in mind that the degree of emphasis placed upon a study may vary depending on how critical or influential it has been in relation to your research project. When your first draft is complete, **read it carefully** to ensure that it is free of errors – that your argument progresses logically and sequentially from introduction to conclusion. Leave plenty of time for editing and proofreading as **you may be required to repeat this process more than once!**

How Do I Structure My Literature Review?

You should always **first check with your lecturer** regarding programme-specific expectations. However, literature reviews generally include an **introduction**, a **main body**, and **conclusion**.

In your **introduction**, you should...

- Identify the general **topic, issue, or area of concern**, providing an appropriate **context** for reviewing the literature. What is the **purpose** of your review?
- Describe the **scope** and **structure** of your review. Include **overall trends** in what has been published about the topic as well as **conflicts in theory, methodology, evidence, and application**. Explain **how your review has been organised** and what criteria was used to select and analyse literature.

In your **main body**, you should...

- Critically **evaluate the literature**, analysing theories, models, and concepts in terms of their relationship with your research.
- Engage in comparative analysis, discussing relevant **disparities, contradictions, or alternatives** proposed by the wider academic community.
- **Group** the literature **according to common denominators** such as theme, qualitative versus quantitative approaches, corresponding positions etc.
- Demonstrate the extent to which **your study builds upon existing research**, to offer evidence-based recommendations.

In your **conclusion**, you should...

- **Summarise** the arguments presented in your main body, foregrounding major publications in your field as well as the **recommendations resulting from your analyses**.
- Comment on the body of knowledge reviewed, identifying significant disparities, limitations, gaps in the existing research, and **issues pertinent to your dissertation topic**.
- State the extent to which your review has met the aims outlined in your introduction, establishing both the **implications** of your analyses and **issues for future study**.

The 5 C's of Writing a Literature Review

Cite

- The literature in accordance with your referencing guide.

Compare

- Theories, methodologies, positions, and evidence. What do the scholars agree on?

Contrast

- Theories, methodologies, positions, and evidence. What are the major areas of disagreement, controversy, or debate?

Critique

- Theories, methodologies, positions, and evidence. Which approach is most convincing, valid, or appropriate in practice?

Connect

- The literature to your specific research niche.

(Adapted from Queen Margaret University, 2022)

Reference List

California State University-Chico (2010) *Evaluating Information – Applying the CRAAP Test*. Available at: <https://library.csuchico.edu/sites/default/files/craap-test.pdf> (Accessed: 2 December 2024).

Queen Margaret University (2022) *Writing a Literature Review*. Available at: <https://www.qmu.ac.uk/study-here/services-for-students/support-for-learning/effective-learning-service-els/qmu-guidelines-writing-a-literature-review/> (Accessed: 2 December 2024).

University of California San Diego (2024) *Writing a Literature Review*. Available at: <https://psychology.ucsd.edu/undergraduate-program/undergraduate-resources/academic-writing-resources/writing-research-papers/writing-lit-review.html#4.-Organize-your-notes-and-thou> (Accessed: 2 December 2024).

University of Wisconsin-Madison (2024) *Learn How to Write a Literature Review*. Available at: <https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/assignments/reviewofliterature/> (Accessed: 2 December 2024).

Additional Resources

The [ACE Quick Guide to Evaluating Sources and Reading Critically](#) offers additional guidance on assessing the strengths and limitations of scholarly resources in relation to your own professional practice.

The [ACE Quick Guide to Using Sources](#) includes advice on how synthesising source material into an academic argument and contains a phrase bank for engaging with scholarly ideas.



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