

Literature Review Outline

Once you have an idea of the themes that will constitute the sections of your literature review, it is useful to create an outline. This helps you to clarify and refine your sub-themes as well as ensure you are including enough (and the most important) information on each theme and sub-theme. This is a good process to begin after an annotated bibliography, and either during or after developing a source matrix. Please see our other handouts on both of those topics!

The example outline below shows that the literature review is organized around some major themes, and these each have their own sub-themes. Instead of organizing purely chronologically, and definitely instead of list summarizing sources on a topic, the previous scholarship that is relevant to your current study should be organized by theme and then broken down into sub-themes (see Literature Review—Purpose & Structure handout). As you can see, each larger theme has numerous sub-themes. Drafting such a strong outline takes a huge step towards the successful writing of a literature review.

Literature Review Outline Sample

- I. Introduction
 - a. Describe the topic that you have been investigating, why it is important to the field
 - b. Give a “big picture” of the literature.
 - c. Present a thesis or argument statement – why is it important to explore this topic?
- II. Theme A¹
 - a. **Overview** of characteristics of the theme (commonalities, differences, nuances)
 - b. **Sub-theme** – narrow but grouped findings related to the theme
 - i. Study 1 (Research question(s), Methods/Participants, Related Findings)
“In a qualitative study examining Latino high school students, Campos (2016) found that the participants had unique academic experiences due to their location in a suburban neighborhood. Using in-depth interviews, Campos determined that...”
 - ii. Study 2 (Research question(s), Methods/Participants, Related Findings)
In a similar study with African American high school students, Sung (2015) identified three key factors that impacted students’ academic experiences in rural settings, which are.... Sung surveyed students across three different high schools, which may partially explain differences in responses....
 - iii. Study 3 (Research question(s), Methods/Participants, Related Findings)
 - iv. Do these studies share commonalities? How do these studies differ? Discuss
 - c. **Sub-theme** – narrow but grouped findings related to the theme
 - i. Study 4 (Research question(s), Methods/Participants, Related Findings)
 - ii. Study 5 (Research question(s), Methods/Participants, Related Findings)
 - iii. Study 6 (Research question(s), Methods/Participants, Related Findings)
 - iv. Do these studies share commonalities? How do these studies differ? Discuss
 - d. Etc., etc., etc. with other findings that fit Theme A; studies can be repeated if there are multiple findings that fit under more than one theme. However, no need to re-write methods/participants in detail (just enough to remind the reader about the study).
- III. Theme B – follow a, b, c, and so on from above
- IV. Keep repeating with themes
- V. Conclusion: *An evaluation/critique of the existing literature.*
 - a. What are the contributions of this literature to the field?
 - b. Return to your thesis statement
 - c. What are the overall strengths?
 - d. What are the overall weaknesses?
 - e. What might be missing?
 - f. What are some next steps for research? The next steps should explicitly address how to “correct” for strengths, weaknesses, and gaps.
as subconscious. (Level 4)

Comment [RM1]: Examples of how to write about studies without listing.