

## Literature Review Purpose & Structure

### Purpose

The literature review is one of the most common writing tasks of graduate-level work for a reason. They:

- Are a critical analysis of the most relevant and significant works connected to a topic;
- Bring readers up to date on the current state of research on a topic;
- Contextualize a study by establishing what is already known about the research problem;
- Identify appropriate research strategies, data collection instruments, and procedures;
- Answer how a study fits in the larger scheme of research on a topic; and,
- Establish credibility by demonstrating the thoroughness of the researcher's understanding of the topic as well as the relevance of the research.

A helpful way to see the role of the literature review is through the CARS model (see handout—*CARS (Creating A Research Space) Model Workshop*). New research justifies itself, creates its authority, and adds to a field by (1) establishing the significance of the broader topic and discussing what has been done on the topic, (2) identifying something that has not been done or could be done differently for a good reason, and then (3) doing something about this lack or need. The literature review plays the essential role of establishing what has been done (1), which is required in order to derivatively assert what is missing. The better these moves are made, the more credible the new research project is. Such credibility is improved, therefore, by the thoroughness and sophistication of the literature review.

### Structure

The different types of literature reviews found across disciplines are narrative reviews, systematic reviews, focused reviews, and the meta-analysis. The most common is the narrative review, and this handout focuses primarily on that form. Systematic reviews utilize a strict methodology for source selection and often use tables to represent research in regard to the selection criteria. Focused reviews purposefully only home in on one element of previous studies, like methodology. Meta-Analyses examine data and patterns from large numbers of studies. Narrative reviews synthesize a select amount of previous research on a topic, typically to set up the need for, and significance of, new research.

Literature reviews of more than a few pages typically include 3 parts: an introduction, set of thematically organized review sections, and a conclusion. An introduction serves as a linking agent and opportunity for a map that gives the reader a guide for what they are about to read (via *Metadiscourse—see handout on Literature Review: Mechanics*). Thematic organization of the key parts of literature should be chosen and discussed in service of clarifying the research question and project. These decisions express to your reader the role and value of that piece of literature for your purposes—they express your stance on the literature. Typically, the conclusion restates key elements of what was discussed with a focus on how those elements successfully synthesize relevant literature for the new research project.

## Ways of Structuring Themes

Literature reviews should not be organized as list summaries or as *only* a chronological account of previous research (chronological structure can still be used within themes). Beyond these pitfalls to avoid, decisions on the appropriateness of themes are contextual to the project (for help with organization, see handout on *Literature Review—Organization & Selection Strategies*). Once themes are established, ensure coherence by using a heading system and developing subthemes. In organizing around themes and subthemes, sometimes you will dedicate a few paragraphs to a single important source and sometimes you will cite numerous studies in support of a point in a single paragraph. Producing an outline with clear topic sentences will help to ensure coherence and clarity. Here is an example of 2<sup>nd</sup> through 4<sup>th</sup> level APA-style heading use in a literature review:

### Literature Review ←

Second-level headings are flush left, bolded, and written in title case.  
Third level headings are flush left, bolded, written in title case, and italicized.

#### ***Effective Teaching: A Contextual Construct***

The validity of the instrument this paper proposes is contingent on the idea that it is possible to systematically measure a teacher's ability to teach. Indeed, the same could be said for virtually all teacher evaluations. Yet despite the exceeding commonness of SETs and the faculty development programs that depend on their input, there is little scholarly consensus on precisely what constitutes "good" or "effective" teaching. It would be impossible to review the entire history of the debate surrounding teaching effectiveness, owing to its sheer scope—such a summary might need to begin with, for instance, Cicero and Quintilian. However, a cursory overview of important recent developments (particularly those revealed in meta-analyses of empirical studies of teaching) can help situate the instrument this paper proposes in relevant academic conversations.

Fourth-level headings are bolded and written in title case. They are also indented and written in-line with the following paragraph.

**Meta-analysis 1.** One core assumption that undergirds many of these conversations is

When presenting

[https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research\\_and\\_citation/apa\\_style/apa\\_formatting\\_and\\_style\\_guide/apa\\_sample\\_paper.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/apa_style/apa_formatting_and_style_guide/apa_sample_paper.html) (Accessed March 29, 2020)

Another helpful tool is doing a number heading system:

1. Introduction to Literature Review
2. Main Heading (First theme)
  - 2.1 Second-level heading (First sub-theme)
  - 2.2 Second-level heading (Second sub-theme)
    - 2.2.1 Third-level heading (Point about second sub-theme)
      - 2.2.1.1 Fourth-level heading
3. Main Heading (and sub-headings)
4. Main Heading (and sub-headings)
5. Conclusion to Literature Review