Literature Reviews

What is a Literature Review?

Most of the literature reviews you will encounter are found as introductory sections to research papers, proposals, journal articles, dissertations, theses or grants. You may also encounter stand-alone literature reviews that summarize the state of research in a particular field or topic area.

Generally, the literature review selects relevant past literature and DESCRIBES, SYNTHESIZES, and EVALUATES these texts/studies, putting the authors in conversation with each other.

An effective literature review fulfills two purposes:

1) Shows that you have “done your homework” (and thus builds your credibility) by illustrating your familiarity with the major claims, agreements, debates, and critical findings among prominent authors of a field

2) Illustrates a “gap” in the “territory” of this previous research—a gap that can be filled by the current research contribution (see Novelty Moves handout)

Basically, an effective literature review SITUATES one’s work within a broader scholarly community. It is important to understand the purpose of your literature review. If you are unclear about your literature review’s purpose, check the assignment or email your professor.

Connecting Studies In A Literature Review

An effective literature review CONNECTS studies rather than talks about individual studies in isolation. Literature reviews are not annotated bibliographies: they should not have one paragraph per source unless that source is especially formative to the writer’s study.

In general, the topic sentences in a literature review should illustrate connections across multiple studies, showing agreements, disagreements, or understudied areas. Below are some common phrases for connecting studies by showing agreement and disagreement

Use the following phrases to highlight agreement

- “There is strong convergent evidence for....”
- “Research seems to agree that....”
- “X lends support to Y’s finding....”
- “We find support for this hypothesis/theory in....”

Or disagreement

- “The evidence on X is mixed....”
- “There is debate over....”
- “In contrast to X, Y found...”
- “There are two camps....”
Additional Considerations For A Literature Review

1) Interpret the findings of the study as they relate to the research study at hand, rather than just summarizing the findings or committing a “data dump” (see Paraphrasing handout). Often times this interpretation is connected to an assessment or evaluation of the source’s limitations and strengths.

2) Avoid oversimplifying or over-explaining the sources. If they are included in the literature review, they merit some analysis; however, summary and analysis of one source should not (typically) take an entire paragraph. Be concise and strategic on what findings/methodologies to include.

3) Follow disciplinary conventions for including quotations and/or foregrounding author names. Direct quotations are rare in the sciences and social sciences but common in the humanities; the humanities tend to foreground authors while the sciences tend to minimize or eliminate author names.

4) Double-check for accuracy/consistency with whatever citation style the writer is using, both for in-text citations and the works cited (the Purdue OWL is a great source for MLA, APA and Chicago style, and we also have manuals in the GCC).
Example Topic Sentences In A Literature Review

The following topic sentences only summarize one source. They are ineffective compared to sentences that connect multiple studies around one main theme:

In “The Perils and Promises of Praise,” Carol Dweck states that praise has a distinct effect on the way students view intelligence. Through a study done with fifth grade students, she found that students who are praised for their intelligence are less likely to exert effort and more fearful of making mistakes than students who are praised for their process of learning. […]

Larry Van Brimner conducted a study at a high school writing center and found that students who received praise or positive feedback on their writing said that the feedback made them want to work harder. Students who received negative feedback, on the other hand, felt angry with themselves for their lack of writing skills. […]

Sam Dragga advocates the use of “praiseworthy grading,” which involves only responding to the aspects of a student’s paper that merit praise. In a study involving eighty freshmen composition students, Dragga found that reactions to this method were mostly positive. […]

The following topic sentences EFFECTIVELY connect multiple studies around one main theme:

Research has shown that praise is more productive than criticism or negative feedback. Hyland and Hyland note that students who receive positive feedback present more positive outlooks of their writing, while students who receive mostly negative feedback exhibit diminishing motivation. Students in a high school writing center, for example, felt motivated to work harder after receiving positive feedback on their writing (Brimner). In studies of freshmen composition classes, “praiseworthy grading” has been found to support students’ confidence and encourage them to take risks (Dragga; Zak). […]

Studies also show that praising students for their intelligence is less helpful than praising for their effort; praising for students’ intelligence can even be detrimental to young or developing thinkers and writers. Students in a fifth-grade classroom who were praised for their intelligence were fearful of making mistakes and less likely than other students to exert effort to try new class concepts (Dweck). Furthermore, being praised for intelligence can lead students to believe that their intelligence cannot change […] It follows that praising students for being good writers is probably less effective than giving specific praise about their effort and written products.

Research on more advanced students have echoed these findings. Straub’s study of students’ reactions to teacher feedback in a freshmen composition classroom found that students react more favorably to positive or praise comments; students also prefer specific praise over generic comments such as, “good,” which is considered too vague and even disingenuous. […] These results align with Dragga’s findings, which found that students are unsure of how to improve their writing when they only receive praise. […]