The Basics of a Literature Review

A literature review presents the information obtained from searching the scholarly literature on a particular topic.

The literature review differs from a research report because it does not pose and advance an original claim. Instead, it synthesizes various pieces of the literature by summarizing individual studies and demonstrating how they relate to each other.

This comprehensive view will provide you and your readers with relevant background information and establish you as a well-read scholar. It will also help you see where your unique research fits into existing work in your discipline.¹

As always, be sure to follow the requirements of your assignment and to discuss your thoughts and concerns with your professor, colleagues, writing consultants, and librarians.

Here’s one example of a short literature review included as part of a published article².

Read closely for hints on how to summarize sub-topics, introduce specific studies, transition through multiple studies, and relate back to a main topic or bigger theme.

Researchers must explore whether specific groups are at higher risk of abuse. For example, are individuals with traumatic brain injury at higher or lower risk for abuse compared to individuals with spinal cord injury? And if so what makes them more at risk? Are they at risk of specific kinds of abusive and neglectful acts by perpetrators? To date there are no studies that have compared experiences of abuse among individuals with specific types of disabilities. Only two studies have compared the experience of abuse by disability subgroup. Nannini (2006) included comparisons among disability groups when she studied their experiences of sexual assault and help-seeking behaviors after an assault, and Martin et al. (2006) similarly compared prevalence rates of physical and sexual abuse utilizing data from the NC–BRFSS survey of 2000–2001. While this is an important first step, the categories of disability were largely general (i.e., physical disability, cognitive disability/impairment, mental health, etc.) and overly encompassing.

¹ Information for this handout came from previous TLC handouts and "Literature Reviews," a handout available on the University of North Carolina Writing Center website, http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/literature-reviews/

Guidelines for Writing Your Literature Review

✓ The literature review generally consists of an **introduction, body, and conclusion**.

**Introduction**
- states your topic and gives an overview of your review’s content

**Body**
- presents your discussion of the pieces of literature in a logical order.

**Conclusion**
- suggests how the new insight will change research going forward.

✓ The creation of a literature review involves **reading articles, processing the information** from the articles, and **integrating that information in the larger context** of the review.

**Reading Articles**
- It may be helpful to read abstracts of many articles before deciding to read any articles in full. As you read, create a chart to keep track of themes, authors, dates, strengths, and weaknesses within each piece of literature.

**Processing Information**
- How do the various studies compare and contrast? Using your notes and/or chart, can you identify any patterns among the studies’ methods or conclusions? After reading so much on one topic, how would you describe the state of research on this topic?

**Integrating Information**
- The trends you notice across all the literature reviewed suggest how to arrange your summaries and synthesis; the relationships between specific pieces suggest how to transition from sentence to sentence (and paragraph to paragraph). In your view, how is study A related to study B? Does one build on the other? How? Does it contradict the other? Is one an example or consequence of others? Use appropriate transition words such as “similarly” or “in contrast” to indicate these relationships and make the discussion read more smoothly.

✓ Remember to practice good academic writing! Always include evidence to support your ideas and **avoid plagiarism by citing your sources** completely and accurately. **Maintain a formal tone** and use appropriate terminology in your writing.