

CSU Learning Skills: *your link to success*

Academic writing

Writing a literature review

A literature review summarises, interprets, and critically evaluates existing "literature" (or published material) in order to establish current knowledge of a subject. The purpose for doing so relates to ongoing research to develop that knowledge: the literature review may resolve a controversy, establish the need for additional research, and/or define a topic of inquiry.

The purpose of a literature review

The purpose of your literature review is to establish current knowledge on an aspect that relates to legal and ethical issues within the practices of professional nursing. The literature review is a "stand-alone" review.

What format should I use?

A literature review is an aspect of formal academic writing so include:

- Introduction
- Body
- Conclusion

In the Introduction

- define or identify the general topic, issue, or area of concern, thus providing an appropriate context for reviewing the literature.
- point out overall trends in what has been published about the topic; or conflicts in theory, methodology, evidence, and conclusions; or gaps in research and scholarship; or a single problem or new perspective of immediate interest.
- establish the writer's reason (point of view) for reviewing the literature; explain the criteria to be used in analysing and comparing literature and the organisation of the review (sequence); and, when necessary, state why certain literature is or is not included (scope).

In the Body

- group research studies and other types of literature (reviews, theoretical articles, case studies, etc.) according to common denominators such as qualitative versus quantitative approaches, conclusions of authors, specific purpose or objective, chronology, etc.
- summarise individual studies or articles with as much or as little detail as each merits according to its comparative importance in the literature, remembering that space (length) denotes significance.

- provide the reader with strong "umbrella" sentences at beginnings of paragraphs, "signposts" throughout, and brief "so what" summary sentences at intermediate points in the review to aid in understanding comparisons and analyses.

In the Conclusion

- summarise major contributions of significant studies and articles to the body of knowledge under review, maintaining the focus established in the introduction.
- evaluate the current "state of the art" for the body of knowledge reviewed, pointing out major methodological flaws or gaps in research, inconsistencies in theory and findings, and areas or issues pertinent to future study.
- conclude by providing some insight into the relationship between the central topic of the literature review and a larger area of study such as a discipline, a scientific endeavour, or a profession.

Adapted from: *Review of literature*. (2006). UW-Madison Writing Centre, <http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/ReviewofLiterature.html>

Questions a literature review will try to answer

1. What do we know about the area of inquiry?
2. What are the relationships between key concepts, factors, variables?
3. What are the current theories?
4. What are the inconsistencies and other shortcomings?
5. What needs further testing because evidence is lacking, inconclusive, contradictory, limited?
6. What designs or methods are faulty?
7. Why study this question further?
8. What contribution will your work make?

Recommended web resources

How to write a literature review

<http://juno.concordia.ca/help/howto/litreview.php>

Writing a literature review; Academic Skills Program, University of Canberra

<http://www.canberra.edu.au/studyskills/writing/literature>

Writing a literature review; Study and Learning Centre, RMIT

http://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/lsu/content/2_AssessmentTasks/assess_tuts/lit_review_LL/index.html

Writing a literature review; Teaching and Learning Unit, Faculty of Economics and Commerce, The University of Melbourne

http://tlu.ecom.unimelb.edu.au/pdfs/lit_review.pdf

An example of how to write a literature review is found here:

http://www.york.cuny.edu/~washton/student/Org-Behavior/lit_rev_eg.pdf