

DETERMINING SCOPE FOR YOUR LITERATURE REVIEW

In this video we're going to look at the focus and scope of your literature review.

Your literature review serves as an introduction to your topic, and situates it in the context of existing research. It's important though to make sure your scope isn't too broad. If you try to summarize everything you find, it will take a long time, it will be hard to see how your research fits in, and your review will be too long.

To avoid this, make sure your review focuses on your specific research question, not just on your general topic. Doing this will help justify your research more effectively, and will make your review more manageable to write.

Here's an example. If I look for research on a general topic, like homeless youth and mental health, I find hundreds of articles, which is a lot to work with. But if I focus instead on a research question, like How effective are mental health programs for youth transitioning out of homelessness?, only a fraction of those articles are related.

Some key works on the broader topic are needed for context, but focusing on research related to your question will streamline your literature review.

The scope of your literature review partly depends on the type of review you're writing. If you're writing a PhD dissertation, you're expected to be more comprehensive in scope than if you're writing a research paper. There are no rules about how many sources you need to include. This depends partly on the expected scope, and partly on your question: some topics have more written about them than others.

As we just saw, it's important to set limits or boundaries on what you'll include. You will need to carefully consider which areas are relevant and which are not. If you're writing a thesis or dissertation, your supervisor will have ideas about this, so be sure to ask.

Sometimes people really can't find anything written that's related to their question, so aren't sure what to include. Finding nothing is often good news--it shows that there is a gap in the research that you can point to and fill. It doesn't mean though that you don't have anything to write about in your literature review. Think about what research areas form the context for your research, or which existing body of work your work would best fit into. Often there are a few intersecting areas that form this context. For example, if you're studying working conditions for women in the video game industry, you would find research on women in other related industries like computer science, or on women and video games, or on working conditions in the video game industry for men. If your research connects to these areas, you should include them in your literature review.

In all literature reviews, you're expected to include the key works that relate to your question. But how do you know what is a key work? Here are some strategies for figuring that out.

- First, make sure you ask. Your supervisor or committee should be able to advise you about some of the major researchers and important research in your area.
- Second, look at the citations. You can check to see how many times a source has been cited by using Google Scholar or Web of Knowledge. Key works tend to have many citations.
- Finally, check the bibliographies or reference lists at the end of the sources you find. You'll start to notice some authors or studies that are frequently cited, which indicates that they're important in the field.

By focusing on research that specifically relates to your research question, and making sure you include key scholarship, you will have a solid foundation for a manageable literature review.

If you have any questions, ask us at library.wlu.ca/help/askus.