

PLANNING A LITERATURE REVIEW

OVERVIEW

In this video we'll go over the various steps involved in planning a literature review, including researching, synthesizing, analyzing, and organizing your sources.

What is a Literature Review?

Let's start off with what a literature review does. It puts your work into a scholarly framework. Academic scholarship is an ongoing conversation, with different voices contributing to the discussion on a topic. Your lit review shows how your work fits into all the other voices in the conversation.

A literature review analyzes the existing scholarship and pulls out the different themes and patterns found in it as they relate to your topic or question. It's not just a summary describing what others have written. The goal is to situate and justify your work, by showing how it is both similar and different to what others have already done.

STEPS IN PLANNING A LITERATURE REVIEW

1. RESEARCH QUESTION

The first step is to come up with a specific topic to write on, or ideally to create a research question. The research question will guide your research and writing for your entire project, and help structure your lit review.

2. SEARCH SYSTEMATICALLY

After you have a topic or question, you can search for relevant scholarship. A lit review is usually expected to be fairly comprehensive, and you'll be expected to use the key sources and authors on your topic. To identify those, you'll need to find and read a lot more sources than you end up using.

You'll need to search more systematically than you normally would. To search systematically, think about the best places to search. Those might be different than the ones you're most used to, so try a few.

Consider carefully what search terms you use, and make sure you use the terms other people writing on your topic would use to refer to it. Sometimes this is easy, and sometimes it involves a lot of trial and error.

Systematic searching is a process, so you'll need to do some searches, look at the results, and modify or search again multiple times. It's useful to keep track of what you've done as you search. To do this, you can create a tracking worksheet, listing things like where you searched, what terms you used, and notes to yourself about any future modifications.

How do you know when you've found enough? This depends on your topic. In general, though, you'll know you've found the key authors and works on the topic when you keep seeing them referred to in other peoples' bibliographies.

3. READ ANALYTICALLY

You'll want to be sure you read the sources you find analytically and take good notes as you go. Remember that not all the sources you find on your topic are relevant, only the ones that relate to your research question.

You'll need to read for the usual things, like the main theory and method used by the researcher, the main findings and arguments, and the strengths and weaknesses. But you also need to think about the source's relationship to the other things you've read. How is it similar or different? What does it contribute to the overall scholarly conversation on the topic?

Remember that you don't have to read it all in detail. Skim read first and sort by priority. You'll be able to read many sources fairly quickly just for the basics, and take brief notes. Focus your detailed reading and note-taking on the few sources that are most directly relevant to your work.

4. SYNTHESIZE AND ANALYZE

After you read and take notes, go back through your notes, and look for patterns or themes that emerge. These patterns could be anything, depending on the scholarship in your area. They could relate to research findings, and what people agree or disagree on, what areas people have focused on, what they have researched and what they haven't, what approaches, theories and methods people have or haven't used, or how things in your area have changed over time.

It's helpful to use a system for coding and organizing your notes into themes. One common strategy is to use sticky notes to write things on and move them around into groupings. Another strategy is to use a matrix or table to organize your themes. You can list the themes as columns, and your sources across the top as rows, and note where each of the sources fits one of the themes. You can also organize your concepts using a visual tool like a concept map. There are many free online tools to help you do this. Use whatever strategy works for you. Using some kind of method to organize your themes will make your lit review a lot easier to write.

5. ORGANIZE

Once you've figured out what patterns there are to talk about, you can start organizing your review. Remember that your literature review is there to situate your research in its scholarly context. This is so others can see how your research is similar to what already exists. But it also justifies your work by showing that it is somehow different, and therefore worth doing

Literature reviews look different in different disciplines, but the basic structure is focused around these goals of situating and justifying your work. In the body you discuss the themes and patterns you found in the literature as they relate to your research question, including any gaps you see. You will summarize many themes and studies only briefly, but go into detail with a few that are most relevant. At the end, make sure that you relate everything clearly to your research question and the gap in existing research that your work will address. That way you'll have set up the reader to understand the importance of your research.

QUESTIONS & HELP

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