

Literature Review

Note: This document should only be used as a reference and should not replace assignment guidelines.

What is “the literature”?

The “literature” refers to the collection of all the scholarly writings on any given topic. These include:

- peer-reviewed articles
- books
- conference proceedings
- dissertations

Depending on the topic, some professional websites or other electronic sources may also be considered part of the literature, but these sources should only be included when they are central to the discussion about your topic and extremely reputable.

What is a literature review?

A literature review reflects your understanding of how all the relevant published material on a given topic answers a specific research question. It is similar to an annotated bibliography in that it presents and summarizes relevant research, however, it goes beyond an annotated bibliography as it is not just a list of sources but an exploration of how the literature relates to each other and their relevancy.

A literature review should

- give you and the reader a clear sense of the research that exists
- lay out how the literature relates to each other
- show how research compares to and contrasts with other research
- identify gaps in the current research
- offer a basic critique of other literature

Conducting a Literature Review

Research

Your literature review should focus on a **research question**. You may end up revising this question during the research process to better reflect the trajectory of current research. A sample research question is, “How does joint custody affect children?”

- Identify **key terms** that you can use for searching library databases. Keep in mind that terms might vary from study to study. Look within useful articles for key terms that might be better or might help you find additional material. Key terms for the sample question might be “joint custody” and “children.”
- Search databases for relevant literature. Keep in mind that, depending on your topic, you may need to search multiple databases. Don’t hesitate to ask a subject librarian for help.
- Print or collect your sources in a way that allows you to make notes on them and keep track of bibliographical information.
- Read your sources selectively. Scan the titles, authors, abstracts, introductions, discussions, and conclusions. Make note of important findings and references to previous studies and theories.

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Pre-Writing

- At this point, you should be able to identify “landmark” works and theories—works that set the field in motion or changed it dramatically. These works are often referenced in the literature and should figure prominently in your literature review.
- Begin reading and annotating articles in full (scan parts that are not relevant to your research question). You should also discard articles that are not relevant.
- Make note of sub-categories for your research question—categories that contain information that refers to part of your research question. Sample sub-categories might be “Joint Custody vs. Visitation,” “Children’s Age,” “Parental Attitudes toward Each Other,” and “Continuity.” Begin putting works into these categories. Some sources may fit into multiple categories, while some will only fit into one.
- Draft an outline that uses subheadings. Fill in the sources you want to use under each. You may already have identified quotations or specific points you want to mention from your sources. Be sure to include mention of gaps in the literature.

Writing

- Begin by stating or rephrasing your research question, then providing some background information for the topic.
- Your literature review should have a **thesis** that answers your research question in **the way that the majority of your research supports**. For instance, you might use a phrase like, “The majority of researchers agree that...” or “Researchers are currently divided over whether...”
- Include transitions that will help show how studies interact with each other—how they compare and how their conclusions differ. Highlight landmark studies and show how subsequent research has evolved. For example, “While Smith focuses more directly on the child’s perspective in joint custody, Johnson looks specifically at the environment created by joint custody for both parents and children.”
- Use the literature to critique other literature: show where studies come into conflict and what the majority findings are.
- Create a bibliography that includes only the sources you mention in your paper.