



Literature Reviews: Purpose and Key Moves

Definition

A literature review reflects the idea that scholarship is a cumulative enterprise. In a literature review, a scholar crafts a well-reasoned overview of the key trends, strengths, and weaknesses of existing research and draws an evaluative conclusion about the state of that research. As an argumentative piece of writing, a literature review provides the necessary terrain that leads to the writer's own contribution to a growing body of knowledge.

Purpose of a Literature Review

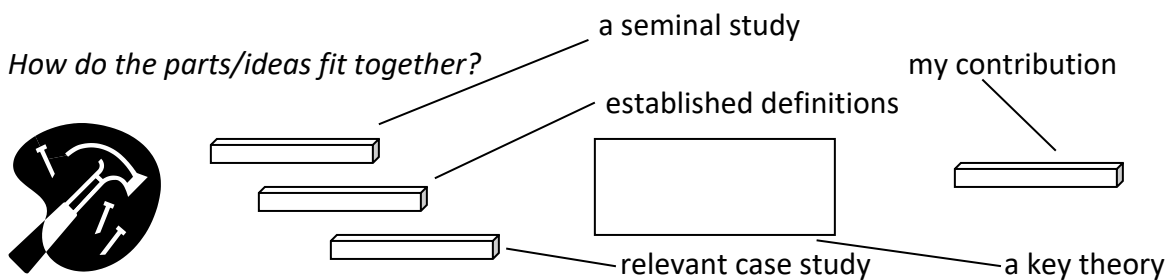
- To provide necessary background information.
- To establish the importance of and the writer's familiarity with a topic.
- To evaluate the current state of knowledge around a particular topic.
- To justify and "carve out a space" for further work, allowing the writer to situate his or her proposed research in the context of an existing scholarly conversation.

Four Key Moves: Summarizing with an Agenda

1. Establish a research territory.
2. Review and *purposefully reorganize* the relevant literature. Reveal *patterns* in the literature.
3. Establish a niche/draw an evaluative conclusion – *turn* the discussion with an observation that signals to the reader a gap, problem, or deficiency in the current state of knowledge.
4. Occupy the niche – signal how your contribution *responds* to the gap, problem, or deficiency.

Analogy of the Prefabricated Table

Think of a literature review as a prefabricated kitchen table. The successful review logically combines already existing pieces of information and demonstrates how the writer's contribution will complete the assembled table. Readers don't want the burden of figuring out how these pieces of information relate, and they don't want to be confused by extra screws, legs, and wrenches. The literature review should present a carefully constructed table, not a catalogue of table parts.



Anatomy of a Literature Review

Introduction

**Provide an overview of the kitchen table.*

- *Establish a research territory:* Define or identify the general topic, issue, or area of concern.
- *Briefly establish a niche/an evaluative thesis:* Point out overall trends in what has been published about the topic; conflicts in theory, methodology, evidence, and conclusions; gaps in research and scholarship; or a single problem or new perspective of interest.
- *Briefly occupy the niche:* Establish your reason for reviewing the literature (point of view). How does your proposed research respond to the current state of knowledge?

Body

**Reshuffle and review the literature – describe how the prefabricated pieces of the table fit together.*

**Identify what piece of the table is needed. TURN the discussion to establish a niche/an evaluative conclusion – identify the gap, problem, or deficiency your work will address.*

**Begin to occupy the niche – describe how your work responds to the gap, problem, or deficiency.*

- Group/organize 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.
- Summarize individual studies or articles with as much or as little detail as each merits according to its comparative importance in the literature.
- Establish the relationships (commonalities, differences, patterns, trends, gaps) among sources and between your research and the sources reviewed.
- Provide the reader with strong “umbrella” sentences at the beginnings of paragraphs, “signposts” throughout, and brief “so what” summary sentences at intermediate points.

Conclusion

**Highlight the niche/evaluative conclusion and, if appropriate, your intent to fill it.*

- Summarize the main findings of your review.
- Reiterate your evaluative conclusion regarding the current state of this body of knowledge, pointing out major methodological flaws for gaps in the research, inconsistencies in theory and findings, and areas or issues pertinent to your research.
- Conclude by reiterating the relationship between the central topic of the literature review and your proposed research. Answer the question: So what?