Writing a Literature Review

Why write a literature review? A literature review plays a vital role in a paper because it sets the stage for your work by providing insight into current research on a topic and applied interventions. A literature review empowers you to provide context for your work and connect it with scholars in your field.

To begin your literature review, imagine yourself entering scholarly conversations and consider what kinds of scholars might be interested in your work and what they would want to know. For instance, if you write about criminal justice reform, criminal justice and legal scholars might want to know what others have argued about the topic, the theories underlying your ideas, etc.

In your literature review, you will organize, integrate, and evaluate previously published material on your topic by discussing the progress that these authors and researchers have made toward clarifying the problem and then signaling where your work may or may not align or where your work continues the research.

According to Seventh Edition of the APA Manual, your literature review should (1) define and clarify the problem, (2) summarize previous research, (3) identify relations, contradictions, gaps, and inconsistencies in the literature, and (4) suggest the next steps in solving the problem.

Literature Review Questions:

Questions to help you begin:

- What are key ideas and/or terms we need to know?

- What are the major theories and/or stances?

- What are recent debates or conversations about the topic?

- Who are the main participants discussing the topic?

Define and Clarify the Issue

The literature review first needs to clearly state the issue and major ideas we need to understand.

Example:

My topic is criminal justice reform.

My literature review would first need to define the issue by defining key terms like "justice" and "reform," specifying which kind of criminal law I am focusing on, and clarifying the stakes in the debates (i.e., why is discussing reform important?).

- Tip: Be careful not to overly generalize the topic! Be broad enough to give context, but specific enough so it is useful.

Summarize Prior Research

Your literature research also needs to offer some background about the topic by summarizing what other scholars have argued (i.e., who are the main researchers exploring the topic?). Set the context of the issue.

Example:
- Jones (2022) found...
- Hagen (2021) found...
- Whereas Jared (2021) revealed...

- Tip: If you notice a work cited in multiple works, that is a sign that it is a pivotal publication that belongs in your literature review.

Identify Differences in the Literature

After summarizing prior research, consider important <u>differences</u> in the literature (i.e., what debates exist on the topic?)

Example:

While Jones (2022) **found** an 12.4% decrease in recidivism from the Davies Reform of 2016, Hogen (2023) **shows** how published rates of recidivism can be skewed from reporting errors. Furthermore, Thomas (2018) **suggests** that studying rates of recidivism are not nearly as important as studying the severity of the crimes committed.

• Tip: Use verbs like "found," "suggests," "argues," "shows" to discuss what works are doing.

Propose Next Steps to Solve the Problem

Lastly, and perhaps the most important step of the literature review, situate your ideas/arguments (i.e., what are you arguing/explaining and how does it fit in?).

Example:

Based on the literature, practitioners have advocated for the no tolerance policy, the three-strikes law, and the death penalty yet the crime rates continue to rise. **My paper explores why this issue persists, and why offering job training resources to communities experiencing high levels of crime might offer a stronger possibility of success.**

• Tip: Try to use this opportunity to underscore the importance of your work, and why it matters in your field.

Please consult your APA Manual or contact the Writing Studio for further assistance.