

Finding literature reviews

WHAT IS A LITERATURE REVIEW?

“The literature”, in this context, refers to published scholarly work. For instance, scientific scholarly literature includes journal articles, conference proceedings, technical reports and books.

A “literature review” reviews the scholarly literature on a specific topic by summarizing and analyzing published work on that topic. A literature review has several purposes:

- to evaluate the state of research on a topic
- to familiarize readers and students with what has already been done in the field
- to suggest future research directions or gaps in knowledge

Green, Johnson and Adams describe a literature review as

a type of research article published in a professional peer-reviewed journal. The purpose of a literature review is to objectively report the current knowledge on a topic and base this summary on previously published research. A literature review provides the reader with a comprehensive overview and helps place that information into perspective.¹

Most research articles include a section that reviews previous work, but this is not as comprehensive as an article-length literature review. A literature review does not include new, unpublished research results.

FINDING EXAMPLES AND HELP

- For a quick and useful introduction to the process of writing a literature review, see this handout from the University of North Carolina: http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/literature_review.html
- UC Davis science professors discuss the usefulness of reviews and the process of writing a literature review in two videos here: <http://writing.ucdavis.edu/sciencewriters/uwp.html>
- You can see literature reviews written by students at the Prized Writing website: <http://prizedwriting.ucdavis.edu/past>
- While many journals occasionally publish literature reviews, some journals only focus on reviews. One example is the series *Annual Reviews*, which publishes journals of reviews in physical, life and social sciences. This can be a great place to find reviews on many topics. Access Annual Reviews at <http://www.annualreviews.org/> (must be on campus or logged in through the VPN).

There are many resources available online and in print that discuss the process of writing a good literature review. To find guides from many other libraries, search online for “literature reviews” or “finding literature reviews.” Many general writing guides also include a “writing literature reviews” section; ask your professor or a librarian for some advice for your specific field.

¹ Green BN, Johnson CD, Adams A. Writing narrative literature reviews for peer-reviewed journals: secrets of the trade. *Journal of Chiropractic Medicine* 2006;5(3): 101-117. DOI: 10.1016/S0899-3467(07)60142-6. This article includes a guide for writing reviews (focused on medical literature), a guide for evaluating reviews, and a list of further reading on the subject of literature reviews.

Finding literature reviews – tips for library searching

LOOKING FOR LITERATURE REVIEWS

Literature reviews are generally published as journal articles, so finding them in the library involves the same process as looking for other types of articles: search an article database. The library subscribes to hundreds of different article databases; each typically only covers a specific discipline, though some are quite broad.

- To find an appropriate database, go to the library subject guide for your subject:
<http://www.lib.ucdavis.edu/ul/research/subjects/>

Ask a librarian for help finding the best database for your topic. For science topics, the database Web of Science covers articles in all sciences and is a good place to start.

If you are writing a literature review of your own, you will need to search appropriate article databases for articles on your topic, which you will then synthesize.

BASIC TECHNIQUES FOR FINDING REVIEWS

If you are looking for already-published literature reviews, try the following:

- In an article database, search for the keywords “literature review” or “review” (in title or topic) in addition to your topic keywords
- Some article databases have “reviews” coded as a separate article format. For example, Web of Science lists “reviews” under *document type*. Do a topic search, then click this box to refine to only review articles. In some databases (such as BIOSIS) this is called *literature type*. Pubmed includes *Review* as a filter under “type of article”. In PsycINFO, include “literature review” as a *methodology*.
- You will still need to look at the papers you find to determine if they are truly literature reviews. Access the full-text of the paper (using the orange UC eLinks button) and read the first page or two. If it reports original research results, it’s not a review article. Most reviews explicitly state that they are reviewing the literature in the abstract or first paragraphs, or use the phrase “We review recent studies” or similar. Review articles also typically cite dozens of other papers in their quest to be comprehensive, so their bibliography sections are longer than usual.
- Don’t forget to search review journals – try Annual Reviews (<http://www.annualreviews.org>).
- Remember not all specific topics have review papers already published on them – you may need to broaden your keywords (by using fewer or less specific terms) to find a review of your subject.

GETTING HELP

Want more help? Stop by the library reference desk or make an appointment:

- Visit a reference desk in Shields, Physical Sciences & Engineering, CHSL or BML:
<http://www.lib.ucdavis.edu/ul/about/directories/refdesk/>
- Or contact the librarian for your subject area for an appointment:
<http://www.lib.ucdavis.edu/ul/about/directories/subjspec.php>