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A literature review is a survey of scholarly sources on a specific topic. It provides an overview of current knowledge, allowing you to identify relevant theories, methods, and gaps in the existing research.

Conducting a literature review involves collecting, evaluating and analyzing publications (such as books and journal articles) that relate to your research question. There are five main steps in the process of writing a literature review:

Search for relevant literature

Evaluate sources

Identify themes, debates and gaps

Outline the structure

Write your literature review

Step 1: Search for relevant literature

Before you begin searching for literature, you need a clearly defined topic.

If you are writing the literature review section of a dissertation or research paper, you will search for literature related to your research problem and questions.

If you are writing a literature review as a stand-alone assignment, you will have to choose a focus and develop a central question to direct your search. Unlike a dissertation research question, this question has to be answerable without collecting original data. You should be able to answer it based only on a review of existing publications.

Step 2: Evaluate and select sources

You probably won't be able to read absolutely everything that has been written on the topic – you'll have to evaluate which sources are most relevant to your questions.

For each publication, ask yourself:

What question or problem is the author addressing?

What are the key concepts and how are they defined?

What are the key theories, models and methods? Does the research use established frameworks or take an innovative approach?

What are the results and conclusions of the study?

How does the publication relate to other literature in the field? Does it confirm, add to, or challenge established knowledge?

How does the publication contribute to your understanding of the topic? What are its key insights and arguments?

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the research

Step 3: Identify themes, debates, and gaps

To begin organizing your literature review's argument and structure, you need to understand the connections and relationships between the sources you've read. Based on your reading and notes, you can look for:

Trends and patterns (in theory, method or results): do certain approaches become more or less popular over time?

Themes: what questions or concepts recur across the literature?

Debates, conflicts and contradictions: where do sources disagree?

Pivotal publications: are there any influential theories or studies that changed the direction of the field?

Gaps: what is missing from the literature? Are there weaknesses that need to be addressed?

This step will help you work out the structure of your literature review and (if applicable) show how your own research will contribute to existing knowledge.

Step 4: Outline your literature review's structure

There are various approaches to organizing the body of a literature review. You should have a rough idea of your strategy before you start writing.

Depending on the length of your literature review, you can combine several of these strategies (for example, your overall structure might be thematic, but each theme is discussed chronologically)