# Literature Reviews

## What is a Literature Review? It is…

* Simply a summary of existing scholarship on a particular topic.
* Commonly a prelude to further research.
* Usually near the beginning of a thesis or dissertation, directly after the introduction (there are exceptions to this, so it is advisable to confirm this with your supervisor).
* Based on secondary sources – i.e. what others have already written on a subject.
* Not concerned about discovering new knowledge or information.
* Almost entirely focused on relevant *academic*literature and the data collected or theories put together by recognised experts in the field.  Popular or non-academic sources may be brought in occasionally to illustrate a point, but the central focus is always on academic sources.

**A literature review will...**

* Try to look at as much of this existing research as possible.
* Review major scholarly books in the relevant area.
* Also take a keen interest in journal articles, which in many subjects give more up-to-date material than books.

## Writing a Literature Review

**Preparing a literature review involves:**

* Searching for reliable, accurate and up-to-date material on a topic or subject.
* Reading and summarising the key points from this literature.
* Synthesising these key ideas, theories and concepts into a summary of what is known.
* Discussing and evaluating these ideas, theories and concepts.
* Identifying particular areas of debate or controversy.
* Preparing the ground for the application of these ideas to new research.

## Finding and choosing material

**Ensure you are clear on what you are looking for. Ask yourself:**

* What is the specific question, topic or focus of my assignment?
* What kind of material do I need (e.g. theory, policy, empirical data)?
* What type of literature is available (e.g. journals, books, government documents)?
* What kind of literature is particularly authoritative in this academic discipline (e.g. psychology, sociology, pharmacy)?

**How much do you need?**

This will depend on the length of the dissertation, the nature of the subject, and the level of study (Undergraduate, Masters, PhD). As a very rough rule of thumb – you may choose 8-10 significant pieces (books and/or articles) for an 8,000 word dissertation, up to 20 major pieces of work for 12-15,000 words, and so on. Bear in mind that if your dissertation is based mainly around an interaction with existing scholarship you will need a longer literature review than if it is there as a prelude to new empirical research. Use your judgement or ask your supervisor for guidance.

**Where to find suitable material**

Your literature review should include a balance between substantial academic books, journal articles and other scholarly publications. All these sources should be as up-to-date as possible, with the exception of ‘classic texts’ such as major works written by leading scholars setting out formative ideas and theories central to your subject. There are several ways to locate suitable material:

**Module bibliography:**

For undergraduate dissertations, look first at the bibliography provided with the module documentation. Choose one or two likely looking books or articles and then scan through the bibliographies provided by these authors. Skim read some of this material looking for clues: can you use these leads to identify key theories and authors or track down other appropriate material?

**Library catalogue search engine:**

Enter a few key words to capture a range of items but avoid over-generalisations; if you type in something as broad as ‘social theory’ you are likely to get several thousand results. Be more specific: for example, ‘Heidegger, existentialism’. Ideally, you should narrow the field to obtain just a few dozen results. Skim through these quickly to identity texts which are most likely to contribute to your study.

Library bookshelves: browse the library shelves in the relevant subject area and examine the books that catch your eye. Check the contents and index pages, or skim through the introductions (or abstracts, in the case of journal articles) to see if they contain relevant material and replace them if not. Don’t be afraid to ask one of the subject librarians for further help. Your supervisor may also be able to point you in the direction of some of the important literature, but remember this is your literature search, not theirs.

Online: for recent journal articles you will almost certainly need to use one of the online search engines. These can be found on the ‘Indexing Services’ button on the Templeman Library website. Kent students based at Medway still need to use the Templeman pages to access online journals, although you can get to these pages through the Drill Hall Library catalogue.

Contact the relevant subject librarian for your discipline and take a look as well at the resource guides on both the Templeman and DHL websites: [Academic subject librarians & resource guides](https://student.kent.ac.uk/studies/library-it/librarians#guides).

**Check that you have made the right selection by asking:**

* Has my search been wide enough to ensure that I have identified all the relevant material, but narrow enough to exclude irrelevant material?
* Is there a good enough sample of literature for the level (PhD, Masters, undergraduate) of my dissertation or thesis?
* Have I considered as many alternative points of view as possible?
* Will the reader find my literature review relevant and useful?

 **Assessing the literature**

Read the material you have chosen carefully, considering the following:

1. The key point discussed by the author: is this clearly defined?
2. What evidence has the author produced to support this central idea?
3. How convincing are the reasons given for the author’s point of view?
4. Could the evidence be interpreted in other ways?
5. What is the author's research method (qualitative, quantitative, experimental, etc.)?
6. What is the author's theoretical framework (e.g. psychological, developmental, feminist)?
7. What is the relationship assumed by the author between theory and practice?
8. Has the author critically evaluated the other literature in the field?
9. Does the author include literature opposing their point of view?
10. Is the research data based on a reliable method and accurate information?
11. Can you ‘deconstruct’ the argument – identify the gaps or jumps in the logic?
12. What are the strengths and limitations of this study?
13. What does this book or article contribute to the field or topic?
14. What does this book or article contribute to my own topic or thesis?

As you note down the key content of each book or journal article (together with the reference details of each source) record your responses to these questions. You will then be able to summarise each piece of material from two perspectives:

**Content:**

a brief description of the content of the book or article. Remember, an author will often make just *one* key point; so, what is the point they are making, and how does it relate to your own research project or assignment?

**Critical analysis:**

An assessment of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the evidence used, and the arguments presented. Has anything conveniently been left out or skated over? Is there a counter-argument, and has the author dealt with this adequately? Can the evidence presented be interpreted another way? Does the author demonstrate any obvious bias which could affect their reliability? Overall, based on the above analysis of the author’s work, how do you evaluate its contribution to the scholarly understanding and knowledge surrounding the topic?

## Structuring the literature review

In a PhD thesis, the literature review typically comprises one chapter (perhaps 8-10,000 words), for a Masters dissertation it may be around 2-3,000 words, and for an undergraduate dissertation it may be no more than 2,000 words. In each case the word count can vary depending on a range of factors and it is always best, if in doubt, to ask your supervisor.

The overall structure of the section or chapter should be like any other: it should have a beginning, middle and end. You will need to guide the reader through the literature review, outlining the strategy you have adopted for selecting the books or articles, presenting the topic theme for the review, then using most of the word limit to analyse the chosen books or articles thoroughly before pulling everything together briefly in the conclusion.

Some people prefer a less linear approach. Instead of simply working through a list of 8-20 items on your book review list, you might want to try a thematic approach, grouping key ideas, facts, concepts or approaches together and then bouncing the ideas off each other. This is a slightly more creative (and interesting) way of producing the review, but a little riskier as it is harder to establish coherence and logical sequencing.

Whichever approach you adopt, make sure everything flows smoothly – that one idea or book leads neatly to the next. Take your reader effortlessly through a sequence of thought that is clear, accurate, precise and interesting.

## Writing up your literature review

As with essays generally, only attempt to write up the literature review when you have completed all the reading and note-taking and carefully planned its content and structure. Find an appropriate way of introducing the review, then guide the reader through the material clearly and directly, bearing in mind the following:

* Be selective in the number of points you draw out from each piece of literature; remember that one of your objectives is to demonstrate that you can use your judgement to identify what is central and what is secondary.
* Summarise and synthesise – use your own words to sum up what you think is important or controversial about the book or article.
* Never claim more than the evidence will support. Too many dissertations and theses are let down by sweeping generalisations. Be tentative and careful in the way you interpret the evidence.
* Keep your own voice – you are entitled to your own point of view provided it is based on evidence and clear argument.
* At the same time, aim to project an objective and tentative tone by using the 3rd person, (for example, ‘this tends to suggest’, ‘it could be argued’ and so on).
* Even with a literature review you should avoid using too many, or overlong, quotes. Summarise material in your own words as much as possible. Save the quotes for ‘punch-lines’ to drive a particular point home.
* Revise, revise, revise: refine and edit the draft as much as you can. Check for fluency, structure, evidence, criticality and referencing, and don’t forget the basics of good grammar, punctuation and spelling.

If you need help or advice with any issue raised in this study guide, please book an appointment with the Skills for Academic Success team (S.A.S.).

Scan the QR code to book appointments, view our events calendar, watch skills videos and more…