

Writing a Literature Review

1. What is a literature review?

A literature review describes, summarizes, evaluates and synthesizes scholarly articles, books, research reports, dissertations, conference proceedings and other sources of information relevant to a particular issue.

2. How is a literature review different from an academic research paper?

The difference between a pure literature review and an academic research paper is subtle and is dependent on the focus and purpose of the writer. The main focus of an academic research paper is to support your own **argument**. The main focus of a literature review is to review a large selection of academic **sources** that address your topic and to present the primary themes, gaps in the literature, controversies and trends that emerge from your investigation of the literature.

3. Literature reviews can consist of the following elements:

- a. An overview of the subject, issue or theory under consideration
- b. A statement of the purpose and objectives of the literature review
- c. Definitions of important terms and concepts
- c. Division of the works under review into sections, themes or categories (see below)
- d. Comparison and contrast of sources
- e. Interpretations as to which sources make the greatest contribution to the field
- f. Implications for future research

4. Organizing your literature review

Like most academic papers, literature reviews must contain at least three basic elements: an introduction or background section, the body of the review containing the discussion of sources and a conclusion which summarizes the review and offers some recommendations.

When organizing the body of your literature review you have a number of frameworks you can follow: chronological, thematic or methodological. Most literature reviews will be structured around themes that emerge from your research.

In your Master's Project overview the following structure is suggested:

- a. History of the issue
- b. Current status
- c. Clinical/practical utilization
- d. Future implications

An example abstract:

Abstract

The purpose of this literature review is to present a general overview of the theoretical and research literature that explores the nature and lived experience of altruism. This essay defines, summarizes, compares and contrasts the major theories of altruism. It examines the different definitions of altruism; exploring specifically the egoism/altruism debate, and presents an analysis of the primary research literature that addresses the following four themes: 1) the altruistic personality, 2) human development and altruism, 3) the experience of altruism, and, 4) the cultivation of altruism. The implications of this essay point to the fact that altruism is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon sourced in the unique motivations, life experiences and personality of the altruist.

Example outline:

- I. Introduction
 - A. Background and Definition of Altruism
 - B. The Egoism/Altruism Debate
- II. The Altruistic Personality
 - A. Genetics
 - B. Types of altruists
 - C. Characteristics of altruists
- III. Human Development and Altruism
 - A. Stage Theories
 - B. Patterns of Development
 - C. Early Life Experiences
- IV. The Experience of Altruism
 - A. Universalistic Attitude
 - B. Ego Autonomy
 - C. Creativity
- V. The Cultivation of Altruism
 - A. Parenting and Socialization
 - B. Religion
 - C. Psychology
- VI. Conclusion and Implication

5. Preparing for your literature review

- a. Read a number of review articles on your topic
- b. Take a look at a couple example literature reviews
- c. Clarify your focus – narrow your topic – and write a focus/thesis statement
- d. Review your focus/thesis statement with your Advisor
- e. Consider organization (see above) – create an outline

6. Writing your literature review

- a. Use primary sources to support your thesis
- b. Be selective – choose the most relevant and scholarly sources
- c. Use quotes sparingly – only when you cannot put it as well in your own words
- d. Cite every quotation and every paraphrased source
- e. Summarize and synthesize within each paragraph as well as throughout the paper
- f. Keep your own voice – start and end each paragraph and section with your own words
- g. Revise, revise, revise – use spell check, review grammar, check APA

References

UC Santa Cruz Library (n.d). *Write a literature review*. Retrieved October 26, 2009 from <http://library.ucsc.edu/help/howto/write-a-literature-review>

The Writing Center University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (n.d.). *Literature reviews*. Retrieved October 26, 2009 from http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/literature_review.html

Additional Links

University of Washington Writing Center (n.d.). *Writing a psychology literature review*. Retrieved October 26, 2009 from <http://depts.washington.edu/psywc/handouts/pdf/litrev.pdf>

University of Wisconsin Writing Center (n.d). *Review of literature*. Retrieved October 26, 2009 from <http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/ReviewofLiterature.html>

Writing and Speaking Tutorial Services (2009). *Writing a literature review and using a synthesis matrix*. Retrieved October 26, 2009 from http://www.ncsu.edu/tutorial_center/writespeak/download/Synthesis.pdf

“A research paper is the culmination and final product of an involved process of research, critical thinking, source evaluation, organization, and composition. It is, perhaps, helpful to think of the research paper as a living thing, which grows and changes as the student explores, interprets, and evaluates sources related to a specific topic. Primary and secondary sources are the heart of a research paper, and provide its nourishment; without the support of and interaction with these sources, the research paper would morph into a different genre of writing (e.g., an encyclopedic article). The research paper serves not only to further the field in which it is written, but also to provide the student with an exceptional opportunity to increase her knowledge in that field. It is also possible to identify a research paper by what it is not.

A research paper is not simply an informed summary of a topic by means of primary and secondary sources. It is neither a book report nor an opinion piece nor an expository essay consisting solely of one's interpretation of a text nor an overview of a particular topic. Instead, it is a genre that requires one to spend time investigating and evaluating sources with the intent to offer interpretations of the texts, and not unconscious regurgitations of those sources. The goal of a research paper is not to inform the reader what others have to say about a topic, but to draw on what others have to say about a topic and engage the sources in order to thoughtfully offer a unique perspective on the issue at hand.”

* Reference: Purdue Writing Lab. (2010).