



Literature review process

This guide takes you through the basic process of conducting a literature review. Apart from the usual steps required to complete a written assignment (see [Assignment Calculator](#) for details - use the Essay template), there are three main steps:

- Finding the literature
- Understanding and evaluating the literature
- Writing the literature review

Finding the literature

In undergraduate assignments, you may be given specific sources to read and review, or you may need to find your own sources.

If you are given specific literature to review, go to 'Understanding and evaluating the literature' below.

If you need to find your own sources:

- The [Successful Searching tutorial](#) will help you start your search well.
- Rather than reading all the sources in depth, survey them first to check if they are relevant to your literature review topic. Work through the short interactive tutorial on [Pre-reading techniques](#).
- You'll need to also evaluate all the sources you find to make sure they are scholarly and appropriate for your task. Watch the Library video on [evaluating sources using APPEAL](#) (video, 6:26) and use the [APPEAL evaluation worksheet](#) (PDF, 268 kB) as you read the sources.

Understanding and evaluating the literature

The resources on Study Smart will help you with this step.

- Begin to develop your understanding of the topic area and the sources by skimming and scanning the texts. You can find more information on these reading processes in the interactive tutorials on [Pre-reading techniques](#) and [Selective reading](#).
- Once you have gained an overview understanding of a source, read it closely and actively. Work through the short interactive tutorial on [Active reading](#) to help you with this step.
- Critically evaluate the literature. Apply [critical thinking skills](#) (PDF, 112 KB). Consider what factors you will use to evaluate or organise the sources. It could be helpful to use a matrix or [graphic organiser](#) (PDF, 55 KB) to help you evaluate the sources according to various organising principles or categories, e.g.
 - by time period - to see how research on the topic has proceeded over time

- by theoretical perspective – to see how researchers with different perspectives have contributed to knowledge on the topic
- from most important to least important – to see which researchers have made the greatest impact on the advancement of knowledge on the topic
- by issue or theme (University of Melbourne, 2013) – to see how research on different aspects of the topic contributes to the overall body of knowledge about the topic

Writing the literature review

When you come to write your literature review, keep the following pointers in mind.

Organising your ideas

- Your literature review should have an introduction, body, and conclusion, like an essay.
- Your ideas about the sources should be organised in a way that shows how the sources relate to each other and contribute to knowledge about the topic. Don't just write a new paragraph for each source. You could organise your ideas in one of the following ways, or another way that matches well with your assessment task:
 - by time period, especially if different ways of thinking about the topic emerged during different periods of time;
 - by theoretical perspective, i.e. discussing all the sources that use the same theoretical perspective in the same paragraph or section of your review;
 - from most important to least important, i.e. discussing the most influential sources first; or
 - by issue or theme, i.e. grouping the sources according to what aspect of the topic their research tries to address (University of Melbourne, 2013).

Here is an example of the kind of matrix that you could use to analyse the sources and organise your ideas about the sources. Note that the column headings you use will depend on the details of your assessment task and the topic area itself. For example, if you are reviewing literature on a topic that is specifically Australian, it would probably not be relevant to include the 'country' column, since all the literature you find is likely to come from Australian researchers. If you were interested in understanding the stance each source takes towards a particular issue or theory, you could add a column to capture that information.

Literature review topic: Elder abuse

| Year | Country | Publishing channel | Discipline/theoretical background/main focus | Reference | Summary |
|------|-----------|---|--|--|---|
| 2008 | Australia | Journal article | Health care, social work, social policy | Kurrle, S. & Naughtin, G. (2008). An Overview of Elder Abuse and Neglect in Australia, <i>Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect</i> , 20:2, 108-125, DOI: 10.1080/08946560801974521 | Brief orientation and definition of elder abuse, mainly discusses responses to elder abuse in policy and programmes |
| 2013 | USA | Report published by USA National Institute of Justice | Social policy and social welfare | Jackson, S. L. & Hafemeister, T. L. (2013). <i>Understanding Elder Abuse: new directions for developing theories of elder abuse occurring in domestic settings</i> . Washington: National Institute of Justice, US Department of Justice. Retrieved from https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/241731.pdf | Proposes that there should be a stronger theoretical approach to understanding elder abuse, using two studies as evidence |

Expressing your evaluative stance

As with an essay or report, your tone in a literature review should be formal, impersonal, technical, and abstract. We can plot these dimensions for a literature review as follows:



You can read the [Essay tone PDF](#) (67 KB) to find out more about these dimensions.

In a literature review, you need to not only describe the literature, but also evaluate it. You need to express your evaluation of the literature in a formal, impersonal, technical, and abstract way.

The following example shows a student writer expressing evaluative stance about two perspectives in sociology. Note how the writer uses their own words, paraphrasing and summarising the arguments of the sources rather than quoting from the sources. The more you can use your own words, the better.

Text

Of the two major sociological perspectives on television's socialising role, the 'bottom up' is **more realistic and flexible** than the 'top down'. Certainly, the 'top down' perspectives are **right** to raise debate about the manipulative capacity of television as a vehicle for reinforcing attitudes which favour powerful vested interests. For example, there is no doubt that many advertisements promote gender roles that don't portray the way people really are, but do pressure and influence people to support the idealised roles (Courtney & Whittle, 1974; Howitt, 1982). The result is that images and attitudes are often created by television to exploit people. However, to then make the **blanket claim** that viewers are passive and mindless and that all television does is dictate to them what they should think is **elitist** (Windschuttle, in Jagtenberg & D'Alton, 1989) and distorts the fact that social reality does not neatly fit ideological patterns. *For example, 'bottom up' theorists show that viewers often read their own meanings into what they see and hear and critically examine it from their own social perspectives (Fisk, 1987). Thus, trade unionists' sceptical attitudes to media coverage of union activity are based on previous experience of biased media reports (Carrol, 1980).*

Not only is it **simplistic** to argue that people always believe whatever television portrays. Television and even advertisements reflect people's experience **far more** than they impose interpretations of the world. For instance, many 'soap operas' do portray and explore images and issues that are relevant and controversial in the lives of most viewers. Cunningham's view of *Prisoner* (in Tulloch & Turner, 1989) illustrates this **well**....

Language for evaluation

Two perspectives are being compared: 'bottom up' and 'top down' approaches.

Adjectives '**more realistic and flexible**' contrast one perspective with the other.

The 'top-down' perspective is positively evaluated as '**right**' on one point.

'However' signals that there are also negative points to the 'top-down' perspective.

The terms '**blanket claim**' and '**elitist**' express negative evaluation of the 'top-down' perspective.

The writer positively evaluates the 'bottom up' approach in an implicit way by making a claim and then providing a *supporting example* from 'bottom up' theorists.

The writer uses positive and negative **adjectives and adverbs** to express their own evaluation of the view put forward.

Evaluative language tools

There are many language tools you can use to express evaluation of the literature in a formal and impersonal way. You could use the examples in the following table as a starting point.

| What are you evaluating? | Positive adjectives | Negative adjectives |
|--|---|--|
| Evaluating the overall contribution or quality of the source | significant, noteworthy important seminal classic fundamental | marginal obscure |
| Evaluating the claims or conclusions of the research | reasonable strong, robust insightful clear fundamental, key, crucial profound, complex | unreasonable weak questionable unclear peripheral, marginal simplistic, oversimplified, superficial |
| Evaluating the method used in the research | reliable careful, thorough insightful, perceptive innovative well designed | unreliable unclear questionable |
| Evaluating the evidence used in the research | conclusive impartial | inconclusive biased, one-sided |

You can also use the following strategies:

- Use **comparative language** to show how sources relate to each other, or to compare points of view, e.g.
 - Phrases such as 'more/less... than...'
 - Joining words such as 'whereas', 'in contrast', 'conversely', 'on the other hand'
- Use **qualifying words** to express the extent of your evaluation
 - Phrases such as 'somewhat', 'to some/a certain extent'
 - Verbs such as 'seems', 'appears', 'could be considered'
 - Modal verbs such as 'may', 'might', 'could', 'would'
 - Modal adverbs such as 'possibly', 'probably', 'certainly', 'usually', 'always', 'never'

Phrases to avoid

Avoid using phrases that make your evaluation explicitly personal, e.g. 'I think', 'I feel', or 'it is my opinion that...'. The literature review is your writing, so unless you attribute the idea or evaluation to another source, your reader can safely assume it is what you think or feel.

Resources for staff and postgraduate students

If you are carrying out research as a staff member or postgraduate student, the following resources may be useful to provide you with more advanced guidance:

- Western Sydney University '[Literature Review: A Guide for Researchers](#)'
- University of Melbourne [Reviewing the Literature: A critical review](#)

Staff and postgraduate students have access to Endnote software for managing your sources. If you use Endnote, you can also add information to each source entry that you can then use to sort your bibliography in similar way to the above matrix for organising your ideas.

References

University of Melbourne. (2013). Reviewing the literature: a critical review. Retrieved from http://services.unimelb.edu.au/academicsskills/all_resources/writing-resources