1. WHAT IS A LITERATURE REVIEW?

A literature review is a description of the literature relevant to a particular field or topic.

It may take two forms:

- A whole paper, which annotates and/or critiques the literature in a particular subject area.
- Part of a thesis or dissertation, forming an early context-setting chapter.

It can be:

- A useful background outlining a piece of research, or putting forward a hypothesis.
- A descriptive review, as in an annotated bibliography.

A descriptive review should not just list and paraphrase, but should add comment and bring out themes and trends.

A critical assessment of the literature in a particular field, stating where the weaknesses and gaps are, contrasting the views of particular authors, or raising questions. It will evaluate and show relationships, so that key themes emerge.

2. THE STAGES OF A LITERATURE REVIEW

Define the problem

It is important to define the problem or area which you wish to address. Have a purpose for your literature review to narrow the scope of what you need to look out for when you read.

Carry out a search for relevant materials

Relevant materials will probably comprise:

- Books
- Peer reviewed journal articles
- Newspaper articles
- Theses and dissertations
- Other relevant information
- Historical records
- Commercial/government reports and statistical information
- Web sites and government publications
- Specialized databases

Evaluate the materials

Points to consider when evaluating material:

- Author credentials – are they an expert in the field?
- Are they affiliated to a reputable organization?
- Date of publication – is it sufficiently current or has knowledge moved on?
- If a book – is it the latest edition?
- If a journal – is it a peer reviewed scholarly journal?
- Is the publisher reputable and scholarly?
- Is it addressing a scholarly audience?
- Does it review relevant literature?
- Is it an objective fact-based viewpoint? Is it logically organized and clear to follow?
- Does it follow a particular theoretical viewpoint, e.g. feminist?
- What is the relationship of this work to other material on the same topic – does it substantiate it or add a different perspective?
- If using research, is the design sound? Is it primary or secondary material?
- If it is from a practice-based perspective, what are the implications for practice?

Analyse the findings

What themes emerge and what conclusions can be drawn?

What are the major similarities and differences between the various writers?

Are there any significant questions which emerge and which could form a basis for further investigation?

3. HOW TO ORGANIZE A LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Introduce the problem, state your purpose, give a brief account of the literature relevant to the problem, and state your methodology.

Body

Discuss your sources. You can organize your discussion chronologically, thematically or methodologically.

Conclusion

Summarize the major contributions, evaluating the current position, and pointing out flaws in methodology, gaps in the research, contradictions and areas for further study.

4. FURTHER INFORMATION

These universities have good information on how to write a literature review:

- Boston University - http://library.bu.edu/research/research-methods/review-of-literature.html
- Columbia University - http://library.columbia.edu/research/learn/research-literature.html
- University of Kentucky - http://library.uky.edu/guides/uvb6534
- University of Washington - http://www.library.washington.edu/research/guides/literature.html
- University of North Carolina - http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/literature-reviews/
- University of California, Santa Cruz - http://library.ucsc.edu/ref/howto/write-literature-review.html
- University of California, Santa Cruz – http://library.ucsc.edu/ref/howto/write-literature-review.html

(Follow links to "Write a Literature Review").