

# Literature Reviews

The Learning Centre

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# Outline

- ▶ the function
- ▶ the approach
- ▶ the content
- ▶ the structure
- ▶ questions the literature review should answer

## Function

- ▶ **It provides the context for research.**
- ▶ **It acknowledges the work of others.**
- ▶ **It familiarises you with the disciplinary 'conversation'.**

## Function

- ▶ **It informs and modifies your own research.**
- ▶ **It identifies an appropriate research question.**
- ▶ **It finds evidence to establish the need for the proposed research.**

## Function

- ▶ **It establishes your thesis in the chain of research in your field.**
- ▶ **It shows an examiner you are familiar with important research in your area.**
- ▶ **It demonstrates to an examiner your critical understanding of theory.**

## Approach

The literature review should be

***Concept-centric***

and not.....

***Author-centric***

Should build the picture of your  
field ...

## Approach

The literature review is organised in terms of **conceptual themes**

Your research question or hypothesis sets the parameters of **your field** within the broader field of your discipline.

## Content

The literature review contains summaries and critical analyses of reported research relating to aspects of your research question or proposition and the methods available to address the question.



**Ensure that every text you include in your literature review does one or more of the following:**

- ▶ **deals with theory that underpins the thesis;**
- ▶ **makes a definitive statements about an aspect of your study;**
- ▶ **deals with your subject area or overlaps it;**
- ▶ **shows your acknowledgement of the work of others in the research field.**

## **Ensure that every text you include in your literature review does one or more of the following:**

- ▶ **shows your acknowledgement of the work of others in the research field;**
- ▶ **assists in building up a coherent argument;**
- ▶ **puts your work into an external context;**
- ▶ **defines the current state of research in your area.**

**Use the 'So what?' test for every reference!**

## Structure

- ▶ Lit. review presents a **coherent argument**, leaving the reader in no doubt that the research is necessary and valuable.
- ▶ Presents a **well-judged selection** of material; it is not necessary to include everything you have read on the topic - only those **relevant to your research question**.

## Evaluative perspective

- ▶ Avoids merely presenting a description of the literature and previous work on the topic.
- ▶ Comments on the **value of the literature** summarised in the review.
- ▶ Clearly **presents your argument** and perspective in relation to the literature reviewed.
- ▶ Correctly **interprets** the findings of the reviewed literature.

# Structure

- ▶ **Organised into sections, sub-sections, with a summary at the end of each major section to emphasise points being made.**
- ▶ **Connects the literature reviewed to the research question and your methods of research.**

## Structure

- ▶ The introductory paragraph sets boundaries of the literature review and provides an overview of the whole literature review.
- ▶ Organised into areas and themes, with summaries and critical analyses of both supporting and critical literature.

**(Avoid author-centric organisation!)**

# Questions the Literature Review should answer:

- ▶ **What do we already know in the research area?**
- ▶ **What are the characteristics of the key concepts/factors/variables?**
- ▶ **What are the relationships between the key concepts/factors/variables?**

## Questions the Literature Review should answer:

- ▶ **Why pursue the research question?**
- ▶ **What are the existing theories?**
- ▶ **Where are the gaps and inconsistencies in our knowledge and understanding?**
- ▶ **What views need to be further tested?**



# Questions the Literature Review

should answer:

- **What evidence is lacking/inconclusive/contradictory/too limited?**
- **What current research designs or methods or seem unsatisfactory?**
- **What contribution to the area can my research be expected to make?**