



Writing Literature Reviews

Study Development Factsheet

A Literature Review should survey a topic or field of research. Your research methodology may vary depending on the kind of literature review you are undertaking – so consider whether the literature review is systemic or qualitative, and whether it is a standalone assignment or part of a larger research project. Nevertheless, the purpose remains to introduce the key sources for a defined area of research while exploring the trends and points of difference and debate that shape your chosen field of study.

What is a Literature Review?

- ✓ It **surveys** the literature in your chosen area of study
- ✓ It **synthesises** the information in that literature into a summary
- ✓ It **critically analyses** the information gathered by identifying gaps in current knowledge; by showing limitations of theories and points of view; and by formulating areas for further research and reviewing areas of controversy
- ✓ It **presents** the literature in an organised way

Literature reviews are designed to do two things: **1)** give your readers an overview of sources you have explored while researching a particular topic or idea and **2)** demonstrate how your research fits into the larger field of study. (Source: [The Online Writing Lab \(OWL\)](#)).

Structure

The literature review:

- Introduces its sources after a **topic sentence** outlining the **field of research** with which it engages.
- Selects sources which discuss the **key terms** and **concepts** in the field.
- Outlines the main points of **debate** and **discussion** in its field of research.
- Uses a mixture of **paraphrase** and **citation** to present the key point from each source.
- **Evaluates** its key sources: What is most valuable in them? What limitations do you find?

Further Reading

Books

Chris Hart (2018), *Doing the Literature Review: Releasing the Research Imagination*. 2nd ed. London: Sage. Access the link to the [ebook here](#) and the link to the [print book here](#).

Diana Ridley (2012), *The Literature Review: A Step by step Guide*. 2nd ed. London: Sage. Access the link to the [ebook here](#) and the link to the [print book here](#).

Articles

Hannah Snyder (2019), "Literature Review as a Research Methodology" *Journal of Business Research*, 104, pp. 333-339. Access the [article here](#).

Yu Xiao and Maria Watson (2017), "Guidance on Conducting a Systematic Literature Review" *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 39.1, pp. 93-112. Access the [article here](#).

Web

Marvette Lacey (2019), "8 Steps to Writing a Qualitative Literature Review" *Medium*. Access the [website here](#).

Conducting a Literature Review

A **systematic review** typically follows a clearly defined set of guidelines. These often include a hypothesis, specific search terms, and a set of relevant inclusion and exclusion criteria. While you can search widely by using the library catalogue search and Google Scholar, you will also typically use subject-relevant databases of academic resources to guide your literature search. Expect to discuss your search strategy or research methodology, and to **quantify** the range of sources you find on specific areas in your field.

Example

Published reviews in the field of physical activity promotion have largely focussed on broader prevention themes, of which physical activity (PA) is a subtheme. In a narrative synthesis of the literature related to allied health professionals (including physiotherapy) and health promotion, Needles et al (2011) concluded that interventions were focused on individuals with identified 'target' pre-existing conditions rather than approaches that identify risk factors. In 2012, Frerichs et al (2012) published a systematic review of the literature exploring whether physical therapists can effectively counsel patients for lifestyle-related health conditions; the seven studies included the provision of additional PA interventions as well as PA promotion integrated into usual practice. The authors concluded that health counselling delivered by a physical therapist has the potential to be effective, at least in the short term. Finally Taukobong et al (2014) performed a systematic review of the literature related to health promotion and physiotherapy (of which PA was a component) identifying a lack of PA promotion in the educational literature. To summarise, despite the compelling rationale for promoting PA and the opportunities that physiotherapy practice presents, little is known about the extent to which physical inactivity (PI) is addressed in current physiotherapy practice.

Adapted from Lowe A, Gee M, McLean S, et al. "Physical activity promotion in physiotherapy practice: a systematic scoping review of a decade of literature." *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 2018, 52: pp. 122-127. <https://bjsm.bmj.com/content/52/2/122>

A standard literature review may not require you to follow strict rules, but expect to have to discuss the significance of your sources, including their discoveries and arguments, as well as considering how theories and concepts have developed over time through your key sources. This type of literature review is often called a **semi-systematic** or **narrative** review, and the approach, where the purpose is to survey and evaluate, is often referred to as **qualitative**.

Support

Study Development offers workshops, short courses, 1 to 1 and small group tutorials.

Join a tutorial or workshop on the [Study Development tutorial and workshop webpage](#) or search 'YSJ study development tutorials.'

Access our Study Success resources on the [Study Success webpage](#) or search 'YSJ study success.'

The Academic Liaison Librarians can also support you with literature searching and referencing. Access their support here on the [Academic Liaison Librarian webpage](#).