

Writing a Literature Review

A narrative literature review is not merely a summary of existing literature. It is a critical synthesis aiming to provide current knowledge, debates, and ideas on a specific topic. It should also highlight areas or opportunities for further research, known as research gaps. A review has many purposes such as identifying a research area, building a rationale for your study or simply understanding the field. In addition, a review can be done at different stages of the research process, but it is continuously updated to keep ahead of new literature (for a thesis/dissertation). The most written type of review is a narrative one, but others exist such as systematic, scoping and rapid reviews (see our other resources).

Whilst the literature review writing process is inductive, as you may already have ideas about your research topic, the aim is to gather evidence to build your rationale. On the other hand, the reading process is a deductive one (as seen below in Figure 1) because you want to read into the field to get a clearer sense of the prominent voices and identify research gaps on your topic. You want to reach the conclusion that one of those research gaps is where your study can be located and where a contribution can be made. In other words, when you read for your literature review, you may research the broader topic and then narrow it down to the specific area of interest. This helps build your rationale for your study. In writing a literature review, though, you will first critically synthesise your selected literature using a thematic approach (other ways exist such as a chronological or methodological approach, it will depend on your research topic, see discussion below). You will then write an introduction, presenting a coherent argument so that the reader can locate your study in the field and understand its importance.

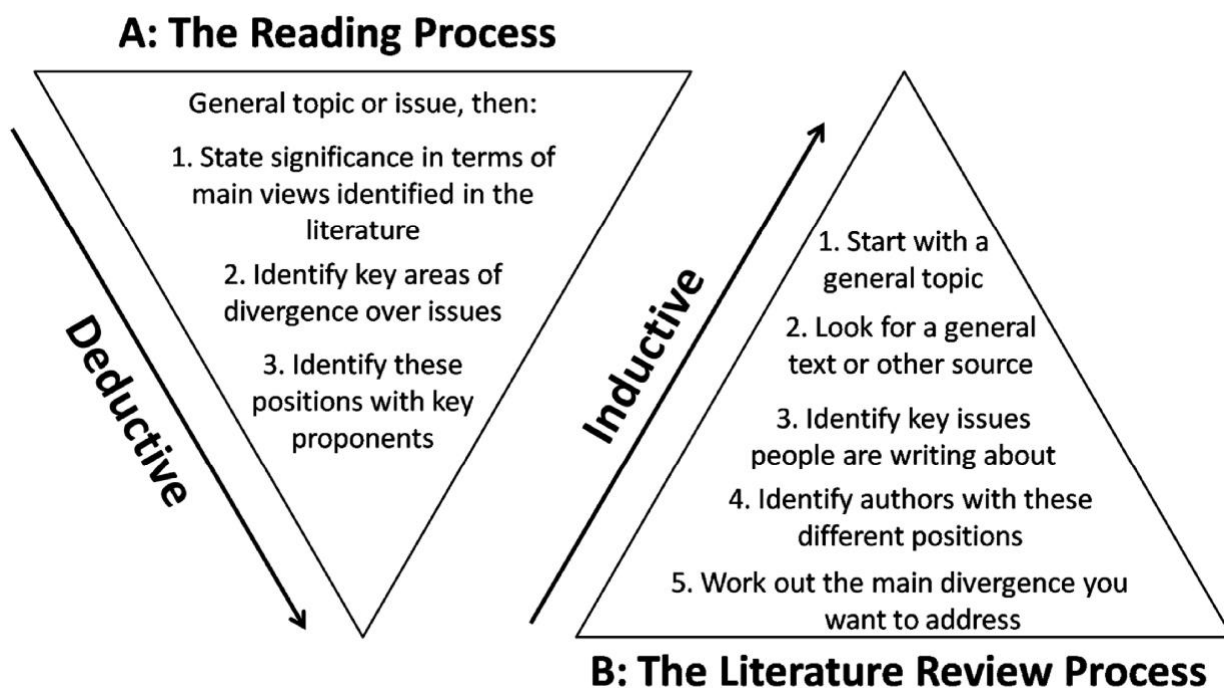


Figure 1: The reading vs writing the literature review process

Thinking about research gaps:

When you locate your study and think about its value or importance, there may be several gaps that your study could contribute to. Identifying these gaps is important for building your rationale to your study:

- **Knowledge-based/evidence-based:** most common, all research will contribute to this area. It occurs when *we don't know enough* about a phenomenon and/or there are inconsistencies in previous research findings. Claims would need to be experimentally assessed. Can also be a practical-knowledge contribution: when a practitioner behaves differently than what is proposed in the literature or vice versa.
- **Relationship-based:** occurs when we know about certain issues or variables well, but are unsure about their relationship.
- **Theory-based:** occurs when a theory or an aspect of a theory has not been investigated thoroughly, or not been tested in a particular way.
- **Methodological/Analytical:** occurs when a research design or methodology (qualitative/quantitative) has not used to investigate a particular phenomenon.
- **Population:** occurs when a population is underserved and understudied

Suggestions for writing a review:

- When you write, consider the reader and how you want them to appreciate your review. You would begin with an introduction, context, and definitions of terms, overview of the field. You will then offer a detailed critical synthesis of some prominent or widely cited research on the topic (discussion of concepts will form part of the review body).
- An effective review is structured according to the main themes you want to discuss in your review (we call this a thematic approach). It is not structured as an annotated bibliography. The way a review is structured also communicates something. You could choose to organise the literature / structure your argument in terms of:
 1. Context (location / region / any other space)
 2. Time (how has your topic been studied over time, what were landmark studies, are there important turning points?)
 3. Concept / Ideas (what are the underlying concepts in the field, are there particular schools of thought, affirmations/contestations, what has been included or excluded?)
- Structure your paragraphs focusing on ideas that are coherent. Conceptually mapping out your themes will help.
- An effective review weaves in the voices of scholars to support your argument. The challenge will be ensuring that your voice is not lost. Maintain your own voice by ensuring that you have clear introductory statements when you integrate evidence, analyse what you are sharing, and pointing out what you want the reader to notice.
- Add a summary paragraph after each section if it contains a long or complex discussion. This highlights your main points to guide your reader through your review.
- Guide the reader throughout your review by using signposting devices (see our resource on cohesion)

- The key to an effective review lies in the ability to critically analyse the literature. This does not mean finding fault with the evidence or the scholars cited, it means identifying strengths and weaknesses of current research, situating these as opportunities for future research.
- Ensure that you use figures and tables appropriately (state whether you are adapting or reproducing) (See our resource for more information).
- End with your rationale (a conclusion) where you will summarise and synthesise the main findings from your review. The rationale should pave the way for your study (if the literature review is for your thesis).

Image adapted from: Centre for Applied English Studies, University of Hong Kong (<https://caes.hku.hk/acadgrammar/litrev/WritevsReadDiagram.htm>)

Content adapted from: <https://mimlearnovate.com/types-of-research-gaps-example/>

Samuel, M.A. 2017. The Research Wheel. 3rd Edition University of Kwazulu-Natal, School of Education.

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