

Different Modes of Writing in the Literature Review

A literature review is more than a catalogue of each text with a description of what it said. The way that you write about different journal articles, books, reports etc will vary according to how you are using them in the argument that your literature review is making. You might focus on one text at a time in some places, where they are significant to your own work, or you might deal with others more briefly as a group, and you might wish to identify different kinds of relationships between the texts, as they relate to your own research. This guide offers an overview of the main modes in which you might be writing about other texts in your literature review.

Descriptive writing

Describing what a text said is the most basic mode of writing. Your reader will need you to give them an overview of a text's contents, in whole or in part, so they can follow your argument.

However, descriptive writing should be kept to a minimum, and be largely a summary of the aspects which are relevant to your discussion, in your own words. If the reader wants more detail, they can use your reference to locate the original for a full understanding.

Pithers and Soden's (2000) work situates the educative goal of 'critical thinking' in the wider context of national development and globalisation, and the need to 'think smarter' in a workplace characterised by social and technological change.

History of a research field

Your literature review might offer a historical overview of how the research on a topic has developed. You might synthesise the overall trend, singling out both key works and authors, and significant developments. This will help you to show how your own contribution is part of this evolution in our knowledge.

The literature on critical thinking in Higher Education began in the 1960s, with Brown's (1962) key study defining it as a central characteristic of all graduate study. Subsequent debates then centred around codifying precisely which modes of thinking might be categorised under the term 'critical thinking' (Jameson and Waters, 1967; Garcia, 1969; Bell et al 1972). Scholars from the 1980s however began to question whether 'critical thinking' was in fact a meaningful concept (see Gluck et al, 1983; Lewis 1985).

Synthesising a body of research

You might in places wish to write about the literature as a whole, rather than as individual texts, especially if there is a clear weight of evidence around knowledge which is felt to be established and uncontested. This is a way of dealing with literature more briefly, and showing main areas of agreement. You need to find a statement which is true of all the papers or books you are summarising, and can add a reference to all of the texts you are drawing on together, usually in chronological order.

Critical thinking is examined in the literature not just as a learning outcome in Higher Education, but also as a 'transferable skill', a desirable attribute beyond the University, in fields such as citizenship or the workplace (McPeck, 1984; Clark et al 1998; Pithers and Soden, 2000; Robinson 2011).

Presenting the range of scholarship

You might however wish to show the range of ways in which a topic has been addressed in the literature, demonstrating its diversity. This might help you to showcase not only the distinct approaches within the field to date, but also contextualise your own contribution.

Critical thinking as a transferable skill has been examined in a number of different contexts outside of Higher Education. McPeck (1984) and Weissberg (2013) discuss its value in the sphere of politics, enabling citizens to make informed decisions about public issues and supporting a democratic society. Pithers and Soden's (2000) study situates critical thinking in the context of a globalisation and national development. Robinson (2011) goes further, viewing the increasing pace of technological development and the shorter 'half-life' of knowledge as driving the prominence of critical thinking since the late 1990s.

Identifying a debate

Debates in scholarly literature are common as claims are contested, or different schools of thought arise. Identifying a debate demonstrates that you can identify what the debate is about, handle these competing knowledge claims and evaluate them, ultimately pronouncing which side you agree with.

The notion of critical thinking as a cornerstone of democracy is contested. Weissberg (2013) dismisses the role of critical thinking altogether, noting that most voters make decisions ultimately based on a range of visceral responses and partisan affiliations, rather than a rational basis. However, McPeck (1984) argues that although the standard approach to critical thinking does not currently serve the goal of rational democratic choices well, dealing not with complex truths but only with argument validity, that it should still be pursued as an ideal, albeit in a different way.