

Structuring the Literature Review

There is no single, conventional way to structure a literature review. However, there are a range of standard approaches that you can choose from to give your Literature Review an overall shape. The structure you select will depend on the aims and purpose of your Literature Review as well as the literature that exists.

The function of your literature review

Every literature review needs to show how the research problem you're investigating arose, and give a critical overview of how it, or aspects of it, have been addressed by other researchers to date. However, within that overall purpose, the particular function of your literature review may vary, depending on your own research aim, the current state of knowledge in the field, and the amount and breadth of literature that currently exists. For example:

- If there is a large, longstanding body of research already in your field, the function of your literature review might be to give an overview of how it evolved, to show how you build on it and sit within it.
- If there is very little research on your topic or it's cutting edge, the function of your literature review might be to look at why it's been overlooked til now, and piece together a useful basis out of comparable work in related fields.
- If your research is interdisciplinary, drawing on and bringing together different strands of the literature in new ways, the function of your literature review might be to identify and connect these previously unrelated strands.
- If your own research takes a clear stance on a contested topic, the function of your literature review might be to outline why the issue is problematic and the different sides of a debate
- If there are various ways you might approach your research or your approach is new, then an overview of the different ways other people have addressed similar research problems might help justify your method.

General Approaches

There are four general approaches to structuring a Literature Review, depending on the main relationship you are creating between the texts you are reviewing, and how they serve your research aims.

The Sequential Approach:

This approach is useful if your central aim is to:

- Chart the developments in your chosen field in a way that highlights causality and consequence (for instance, how one piece of research informed or gave rise to another and so on)
- Use a chronological sequence to demonstrate how an issue or research area has evolved over time

Thematic Approach

Sometimes, your literature review might aim to bring together previously unrelated areas of research, and there is no linear structure to that relationship – you simply identify the different themes under which you want to organise it, depending on which texts you want to talk about as a group. You might choose to arrange your review into different themes, contexts, schools of thought, subject disciplines, or by methods, theories and approaches.

Funnel Approach

The funnel structure moves from the broad to the detailed, the general to the specific, or from the abstract to the concrete. So you start with the broader aspects of your topic (the contextual background, for instance) and then gradually narrow your focus until you reach the specific aspect of the topic that you will be addressing. You might equally be looking at the more abstract, theoretical work on your subject before moving to more concrete case studies in which those approaches have been applied, or more general treatments to more detailed and smaller scale studies. That way, you are guiding your reader and helping them build their understanding of your topic: providing them with the background information and context they need in order to grasp your main ideas.

Mixed Approach

Often, your Literature Review has more than one function and there is more than one key point you want to convey. For instance, you may need to define your theoretical framework, evaluate how other researchers have approached your topic more generally, then outline your specific area of focus and how it relates to the existing literature. Your finished Literature Review will then comprise different sub-sections that each achieve a particular aim.

Deciding on a structure

When deciding on a structure, you might find it useful to consider the following questions:

- What is the function of my Literature Review?
- What do I want my Literature Review to demonstrate to the reader? What do I want them to take away from it?
- What structure would best allow me to achieve my purpose and get my key points across, talking about the texts I want to bring together without circling around in my writing?

Whichever of these structural principles you decide on as a way to organise the whole literature review, you may well be using others of them as a way to structure subsections or even paragraphs. For example, you might be using a thematic approach overall, but each section could be structured chronologically.

Checking In

Each structural approach or option has its own strengths and weaknesses. It's important to check in with yourself and review your Literature Review drafts periodically to see if your structure is working for you. Is it helping you convey your main ideas, bring together the texts you want to talk about together, or is it leading you to be descriptive, repetitive or lose sight of the literature's relevance to your own research? If not, is there another option that might work better for you? Sometimes, our main ideas and key points don't become clear to us until we start writing. So it may be that you are better placed to make a more informed idea about your structure once you have begun trying it out.