Literature Reviews
Merrill-Cazier Library

What is a lit review?

The format of a review of literature may vary from discipline to discipline and from assignment to assignment. A review may be a self-contained unit – an end in itself – or a preface to and rationale for engaging in primary research. A review is a required part of grant and research proposals and often a chapter in theses and dissertations.

Generally, the purpose of a review is to analyze critically a segment of a published body of knowledge through summary, classification, and comparison of prior research studies, reviews of literature, and theoretical articles.

From UW-Madison Writing Center's "Writer's Handbook" @ writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/ReviewofLiterature.html

Step 1   Make friends with your subject librarian

- Visit library.usu.edu/librarians
- Set up an appointment in-person, or get help via Skype, phone, chat, or email

Step 2   Refine your research topic

- Revise and focus as you learn more (an iterative process)
- Look for previous reviews (standalone or part of an article) to get your footing
- Document your search process for organization and transparency

Step 3   Select appropriate search tools

- Look in more than one place:
  - ✓ Subject-specific databases
  - ✓ ProQuest Theses & Dissertations
  - ✓ Google Scholar

Step 4   Conduct your search thoroughly and strategically

- Use both keywords and controlled vocabulary (where available)
- Use advanced search options like "explode"… but remember filters can introduce unconscious bias (e.g. language, item type)
- Try all kinds of search syntax (grouping, Boolean, specific fields)
- Create (and save!) complex search strings for reuse, revision, troubleshooting
- Sign up for accounts that let you save searches, set citation alerts … but use citation management software to keep track of your stuff
- Record how many results you got, date, database, and platform in a research log
- Read the references section of key articles you use ("backward chaining")
- Check "cited by" tools in databases ("forward chaining")

Step 5   Choose what sources to use

- Consider changing sort options for a different perspective (relevance, publication date, highly cited, etc.)
- Do more than scan titles: use abstracts, subject terms, author-supplied keywords
- Establish inclusion/exclusion criteria (methodology, number of subjects, etc.)
- Apply criteria systematically (record which criteria eliminated each source)
- Never rely on secondary citations, but track down original sources yourself
- Get full text of "keepers" and "maybes" (use InterLibrary Loan, not your wallet!)

Step 6   Read → Annotate → Analyze → Synthesize

- Get a sense of the source as a whole, not just parts that support your point
- Make reading an active process through annotation, commentary, reflection
- Start to see each source as a piece of a larger puzzle: Which sources talk about what part of the topic? Agreements, contradictions, lack of consensus? Where are the gaps? What is the timeline of scholarship on this topic?
- Use a matrix to keep track of sources and move towards synthesis (see attached)

Step 7   Write!

- Remember that your voice has a place in this conversation – your analysis and organization is the glue that makes the lit review cohesive
- Use synthesis matrix to group sources according to common factors (theoretical orientation, methodology, discipline, conclusion(s), chronology, etc.)
- "Remember…space (length) denotes significance" in source summaries[*]
- Use "umbrella," "signpost," and "so what" sentences to orient readers to new paragraphs, help navigate your review, and give quick takeaways[*]
- Build a picture of the state of the research on this topic, especially any "methodological flaws or gaps in research, inconsistencies in theory and findings, and areas or issues pertinent to future study" that set the stage for your work[*]
- Be brave and ask for feedback (advisor, faculty, librarians, peers)
- Revise!

When can I stop?

It's wise to continue searching for new literature on your topic as you write, and citation alerts can help you automate this process. Going into your defense, for example, you'll want to be able to respond that you're aware of the existence and major points of X new article and that you'll include it in revisions.

Useful links:

[*]UW-Madison Writing Center "Writer's Handbook"
writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/ReviewofLiterature.html

Helpful breakdown of introduction, body, and conclusion of a lit review.

Merrill-Cazier Library YouTube Channel
youtube.com/user/MerrillCazierLibrary

Find quick demo videos of common research tasks using library resources.

Merrill-Cazier Library Chat Reference
library.usu.edu/ask/

Need immediate help? USU librarians are on chat 9-7 M-Th and 9-5 F.

Merrill-Cazier Library Citation Management Guide
libguides.usu.edu/organizers

Info on the citation management programs supported by the Library.

Synthesis Matrix

	Source 1	Source 2	Source 3	Source 4	Source 5	My Thoughts
Title Author(s) Year Discipline						
Author info (credentials, affiliations, background, etc.)						
Methods						
Main Idea 1						
Main Idea 2						
Main Idea 3						
Main Idea 4 (could adapt to be limitations, conclusions, further research, etc.)						