

The Literature Review

Length: 4-5 pages

Format: Double space; include heading on the first page (top left); place shortened title and page number in the header of every page (top right)

Title: Include an informative, interesting, provocative and/or creative title

Draft for Peer Review: Monday, May 24th

Final Draft: Wednesday, May 26th

The Literature Review consists of an introduction, summary of scholarly sources, a discussion and evaluation of the sources (including disputes and disagreements), and a conclusion in which you put forth your own potential original research questions that will contribute something new to the conversation. A minimum of five scholarly sources (not the same ones you used in the Background Essay) are required for this essay. These can be either academic peer-reviewed journal articles from a database such as Academic Search Premier or a chapter from a scholarly book.

The Literature Review in the Research Process

A *literature review* is a section of a final research report, and can also be a stand-alone essay; both are required for your topic in this class. "Literature" refers to the scholarly writing, published (original) research study results, and other important analyses on a particular aspect of a topic.

A scholarly literature review is part of any final research study or report since it demonstrates that you are familiar with what other scholars have already studied and published on your subject, and allows you then to map out what new arena or question you would like to pursue. There is, after all, no point in reinventing the wheel, i.e., undertaking a study that someone else has already done or trying to answer a question that has already been adequately explored. There's also no point in reaching your own interpretive conclusions without taking into account what others have already studied and argued. You would lack credibility and appear naive and uninformed if your analysis has already been convincingly put forth or refuted.

The purpose of a literature review is fourfold: The first is to **summarize and assess the state of existing knowledge** on your narrowed topic. What knowledge exists and is generally accepted with regard to your topic? Are there important differences or disagreements among scholars? Are there significant problems or limitations with any of the research studies? Which research methods were employed in the various research studies, which were not, and with what consequences? What questions remain unanswered? What aspects or approaches seem relatively unexplored? Through the process of reviewing existing knowledge you will also develop a more **nuanced understanding of your topic**, the second reason for conducting a literature review. This new understanding leads to the third reason, to **raise questions for further research**. In other words, what are you left wondering? What questions or aspects of the issue do you find have been unanswered, underexplored or overlooked? How would our understanding be improved by pursuing those questions or angles? At the end of this process,

you will hopefully find that you can identify several potential research questions. The final purpose of the literature review, based on the sources that have been assessed and the new questions that have been raised, is to identify **one specific and significant research question**. This research question will drive your research from this point forward as you build towards the Final Research Article, in which you present an argument that attempts to answer your own research question.

Required Elements of the Literature Review

Required Sources: At least **five scholarly** articles (must be different from those you used in the BE). Use an electronic database such as Academic Search Premier (select "peer-reviewed" from the search screens of these databases) or Google Scholar (scholar.google.com) or find a chapter in an edited scholarly book. Of the five required sources, one of them can be a scholarly article from *Rereading America* if it is relevant for your topic and research question. At least two of the sources must be no older than three years. The sources should be diverse; you should not have more than two (of the five) articles from the same author or journal; if you do have more than two from the same author or journal, then you should have more than the minimum five sources. Ideally, your collection of scholarly sources should include a variety of research methods as well.

Introduction: The introduction presents your narrowed topic or area of inquiry, whether from the conclusion of your Background Essay or based on a later formulation, its significance, and an overview statement of how researchers have studied this narrowed area (covering the topic sentences of your summary paragraphs). Also include a thesis statement that provides your evaluation of the state of current knowledge and of what needs further study, which should anticipate the *specific research question* you will arrive at in the end. Here is an example from a former student's research project on domestic violence in the case of mail-order brides in the U.S.:

"Although there have been many studies of domestic violence against women and programs adopted to reduce it, there are virtually no statistics documenting instances of abuse in the immigrant bride population. Beyond the normal range of factors that abused women who are citizens face, there are other factors of culture, class, racism, and sexism that further expose immigrant women who have chosen to become mail-order brides."

Summary (include section heading): The summary-of-sources section presents the research, knowledge, and analysis that the literature offers concerning your narrowed research topic. This section should be organized according to the issues or aspects studied, the accepted interpretations or theories, the disputed claims, and any unanswered questions. Do not simply summarize each source in separate paragraphs. The paragraphs in your summary should focus on specific issues, not necessarily on individual authors. For example, if you were studying prison reform, one paragraph might present what three scholars have reported regarding education programs in prison, even though one or more of those authors might show up again in another paragraph on visitation rights. If a paragraph happens to focus on only one author or

article, make sure this is for a good reason, for example, the article represents the authoritative discussion of a particular issue; in such a case, the content of that paragraph should be limited to the issue and not turn into a general summary of the article.

Discussion and Evaluation (include section heading): This section is your discussion and evaluation of the articles from your summary section and not your discussion of the issues themselves. Instead, you are interpreting and evaluating the knowledge presented in the summary section in order to raise questions for further research. You may discuss and evaluate the significance of various conclusions and arguments, the completeness of individual studies, the research methods used, substantial areas of disagreement, debates over definitions of terms, and/or the consistency of the results with each other. As you present your evaluation, do so cautiously with thorough analysis and explanation. Challenging the results of a professional study with nothing but one isolated observation or opinion will reveal your naiveté more than any real weakness in the study. Share your evaluation without using the first person (I, me, my, mine); doing so will shift the reader's focus away from the subject and onto you, the writer. As you discuss and evaluate the knowledge and issues with regard to your narrowed topic, raise questions for further study along the way. Do not introduce new articles in this section that you haven't already covered in the Summary section.

Please note that even though you may take issue with aspects of the research and findings in your sources, it is very rare for the discussion to include a complete dismissal of any one source. If you read a source and find that it has nothing or little of value to offer on your topic and research question, then do not include it in the literature review in the first place. By choosing to include sources in your literature review, you imply that you have already judged them to offer something that is worth consideration.

Conclusion: Proposed Research Question and Significance (include section heading): The conclusion synthesizes the knowledge confirmed through the discussion and evaluation section while identifying areas for further research. After reviewing the literature, what do we know? What don't we know? There should be an apparent connection between the new areas of inquiry and the summary of existing knowledge. Bring your conclusion to a close by identifying and discussing the significance of a *specific research question* that will drive the rest of your research project.

Note: The specific research question you present in your conclusion should be somewhat original. It should **NOT** be a yes/no, good/bad, for/against, pro/con, either/or, right/wrong, or moral/immoral kind of question. Rather the research question should attempt to advance the already-existing knowledge and understanding around your narrowed topic. This can include an inquiry into causes and effects; the evaluation of already-existing policies, programs or proposals; unforeseen or non-obvious connections and consequences; etc. Hint: Try coming up with a single sentence answer (hypothesis) to your own research question in order to assess its viability and originality. Note that your Final Research Article will ask you to present your further investigation of your research question, and will ask you to develop an academic argument based on your best possible answer to it (the hypothesis).

References and In-text Citations: An APA-style References page, with all of the sources referred to in your literature review, must be included at the end of your essay. All quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing must also follow APA guidelines. In your presentation and analysis of sources, avoid heavy reliance on quotations to present the ideas of others. Excessive quoting can turn your literature review into a cacophony of different voices that frustrates the reader's ability to find cohesion between the distinct ideas. In most cases, you are better off paraphrasing or summarizing, which you must do carefully to avoid plagiarism. Quote other authors sparingly and with purpose: to convey an idea that cannot be paraphrased without losing meaning or to convey the power of the original language.

Additional Notes

CQ Researcher: If you happen to find an article from *CQ Researcher* that includes an overview article for your topic area, this may be useful since it would have done some of the work for you in offering an account of various studies, articles and common issues. However, an article from CQR is not itself considered a scholarly source; therefore, you may use a CQR article for your Background Essay and background section of the FRA, but not for the literature review.