

# Literature Reviews

Literature reviews demonstrate what a writer has understood in the research they conducted on a certain topic. Literature reviews **establish a research space or critical conversation** and map the different findings researchers have found on a given topic. By outlining what others have said, writers can clearly insert themselves and their own perspectives on a topic.



## What Should a Writer Do in a Literature Review?

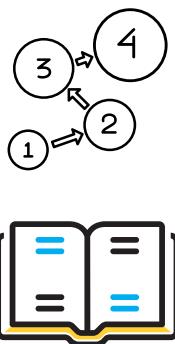


- Outline structure for discussion. How will you organize your discussion?
- Bring sources into conversation with one another. How do they interact with one another?
- Analyze existing research. Are there gaps, contradictions, or more work that needs to be done?

### Organization

Research can take different **organizational avenues**. When you are composing your literature review, consider which approach you might take.

- **Chronological:** Trace your topic over time and organize sources as they were published in order. Consider how opinions/attitudes were changed and debates that came up.
- **Thematic:** Trace your topic by theme and organize sources by the different themes/topics they discuss.
- **Methodological:** Consider the methods researchers used in your sources and compare these different approaches (ex: quantitative v.s. qualitative research).
- **Theoretical:** Consider the theories that different researchers use to frame their argument. Organize sources based on the theoretical lens they use (ex: historical v. Marxist critical lenses).



# Literature Reviews (continued)

## Synthesis

Rather than just summarizing, synthesizing refers to the **connections** you draw between existing research. To make sure you are synthesizing, ensure that you discuss several texts per paragraph. A helpful way to think about this is the following scenario:

You enter a party. Everyone is talking about a certain topic with passion and excitement. You can't tell them to pause, so you listen until you understand the argument. You are now able to engage in conversation yourself. Someone answers you, and you answer them. The house grows late, and everyone must depart, but the conversation still exists and is in progress.

Kenneth Burke's "Burkean Parlor," 1941



This scenario can help writers imagine how sources interact. Imagine your sources are talking to each other: what would they say? Within this discussion of how your sources interact, you can then add your own perspective.

## Evaluation

Evaluating literature allows you to **critically examine** the research they choose to include in their review. You do not have to agree with all the research presented; use evaluative tactics to **determine the source's usefulness** to your argument. Consider the acronym: REVIEW.



- R** • Relevance: How relevant is this source to your argument and other sources?
- E** • Expertise of the author: How qualified is the author to speak on this subject?
- V** • Viewpoint: What is the purpose of this source (ex: inform, persuade)?
- I** • Intended Audience: Who is the author of this source writing for?
- E** • Evidence: Are the arguments presented supported with strong evidence?
- W** • When: When was the source published? Have developments been made since publication?

You should consider these evaluative tactics in an **examination of how they plan to use the source** in their argument. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the source? Does your source support/prove or contest/challenge another source?

# Literature Reviews (continued)

## Student Sample

This student sample is an excerpted portion of their literature review on communication disorders from James Madison University.

### Examining Verb Usage in English Learners

This literature review introduction uses statistics to establish the scope and significance the topic.

English learners, those learning English in addition to other languages, composed 10% of the American school-age population in the 2014 – 2015 school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The U.S. Department of Education (2016) estimates that the percentage of English learners is even higher for those under the age of 6. Scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) demonstrate that many of these children will need support in acquiring English language skills. On the 2015 NAEP reading assessment, the scores of fourth graders identified as English learners averaged below the basic reading level and only two points above children who were identified as having a disability (The Nation's Report Card, 2015). Many English learners struggle to acquire English language skills, but it is important to note that there may be different causes for this difficulty.

Here is the big-picture problem that the writer's research project is responding to.

The writer explains the implications of the data in her own words.

It would be helpful to have a topic sentence / transition that connects the concepts of language differences and disorders to the previous topic of English learners.

If this were a stand-alone literature review, it might offer a purpose statement here (e.g., This review of the literature will examine existing research on [topic x] in order to....).

Some children simply have a language difference, “a rule-governed language style that deviates in some way from the standard usage of the mainstream culture,” while others have a language disorder, “a significant discrepancy in language skills relative to what would be expected...for a clients' age or developmental level” (Paul & Norbury, 2012, pp. 138). A language difference can be due to the cultural and linguistic variables from another language influencing the way English learners acquire English, such as the sounds they produce and the grammatical structures they utilize. An English learner with a language disorder will have consistent errors throughout all the languages they use, which may negatively impact their reading and writing skills (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2017a).

In writing in the health and social sciences (as well as natural and physical sciences), quotations very rarely appear in literature reviews. However, this is one exception: when sharing an established definition.