

## Writing your literature review

Like an essay, a literature review has an introduction, main body, and conclusion.

**Introduction:** This explains the broad context of your research area and the main topics you are investigating. It briefly highlights the relevant issues or debates that have characterised your field of research.

It should also include some signposting for the reader, explaining the organisation / sequence of topics covered, and the scope of your survey. For example you may write something like: "There have been many studies on the effectiveness of advertising on various audiences. However, since the focus of this research is on the effects of TV advertising on children, these studies will not be reviewed in depth, and only referred to when appropriate." (Adapted from the Royal Literary Fund: [www.rlf.org.uk/fellowshipscheme/writing/literaturereviews/structure.cfm](http://www.rlf.org.uk/fellowshipscheme/writing/literaturereviews/structure.cfm))

**Main body:** An analysis of the literature according to a number of themes or topics that overlap with your research. It may have headings.

You can write your literature review one section at a time, but make sure you read through them all to check they link together and tell a coherent "story".

This should show how your research builds on what has been done before. Based on previous research, you provide justifications for what you are doing, why you are doing it, and how you are going to do it.

**Conclusion:** This should summarise the current state of the research in your field as analysed in the main body. It should identify any gaps or problems with the existing research, and explain how your investigation is going to address these gaps or build on the existing research.

For more on this and other aspects of academic study, see our website at [www.reading.ac.uk/studyadvice](http://www.reading.ac.uk/studyadvice)

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# Undertaking a literature review



## Literature Reviews 2

This guide is the second of three looking at the purpose and process of conducting a literature review. It includes advice on:

- Starting your reading
- When should I stop reading?
- How to organise your information
- Writing your literature review

## Structuring your reading

If you have thought about the areas you need to research and have conducted some searches for literature, you should be ready to set down some draft topic headings to structure your literature review.

Select one of your headings and choose a few key texts to read first - three is ideal to start with. Remember that you may eventually be writing about the same text under different headings, so bear that in mind when you are reading and making notes.

**Top tip:** Get into good habits with note-making now to save yourself a lot of trouble later - always write the details of the text at the top of your page of notes, and add page numbers against your notes as you write them, so you can find your place again if necessary. For more on this see study guides on effective reading and note-making: [www.reading.ac.uk/internal/studyadvice/Studyresources/sta-reading.aspx](http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/studyadvice/Studyresources/sta-reading.aspx)

When you have finished reading your chosen texts, write a draft section summarising and commenting on what you have read, taking special care to show how it is relevant to your research. Then look to see what you need to discuss further, and do more reading to enable you to plug the gaps.

## When should I stop reading?

You should be guided by how long your literature review needs to be – it is no good reading hundreds of texts if you only have 1,000 words to fill.

**Top tip:** If you work out what your target word count will be for each section and aim to write to it, you will avoid over-reading or writing on any one topic.

Set limits on how long you will spend reading. Plan backwards from your deadline and decide when you need to move on to other parts of your investigation e.g. gathering the data.

You need to show you have read the major and important texts in your topic, and that you have also explored the most up-to-date research. If you have demonstrated both of these, you are on the right lines.

**Top Tip:** An easy way to identify the major standard texts in your field is to check reference lists to see which texts are frequently cited.

If you keep coming across very similar viewpoints and your reading is no longer providing new information, this is a sign you have reached saturation point and should probably stop.

Be guided by your research questions. When reading, ask yourself, “How does this relate to my investigation?” If you are going off into unrelated areas, stop reading and refocus on your topic.

**For Postgraduates:** If you are doing a PhD or a research project that spans over a number of years, you will have to make a conscious decision to change focus from background reading to gathering data. It is normal to do a draft of the literature review then put it to one side to return to later in your project. You still need to keep up-to-date in your field, so it may help to schedule some time each week for reading.

## I have too much information – how can I organise it all?

Spidergrams are a good way of getting an overview of what you have read and showing connections between ideas. You may like to start by doing a spidergram for the whole topic of your investigation and then break it down into smaller spidergrams for the different areas you have read about.

Group what you have read into different topics or themes. These can provide useful headings when you come to write up your literature review. Use different coloured highlighters to identify which topic or heading each article fits into.

Be selective - you don't have to include everything you have read in your literature review. Only include research which is relevant and which helps you understand more about your own investigation. What you leave out won't be wasted as it helped you refine your understanding of the wider issues and identify what was relevant to your own investigation.

You don't have to refer to everything in the same depth in your literature review. You are usually expected to prioritise recent research. Some scientific research that was crucial in the past is now out of date. For instance, there may be a few older studies that were important in starting research in the field, but their methods have been surpassed by more accurate methods. You only need to demonstrate your awareness of these older, dated studies in a few sentences, then move on to discussing in greater depth the up-to-date methods and why they are more accurate.

**Top Tip:** Develop a simple and easy-to-use filing system to keep your reading and notes organised. This could be a box file for all your literature review material. If you are doing a thesis or longer project you may expand this into a box file per topic or section. Also keep your bibliography up to date as you go along to save pain later. Postgraduates may want to use reference-managing software like Endnote or RefMan to compile their bibliography.