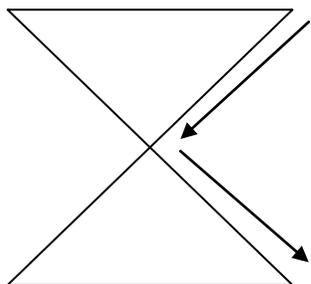


When writing your discussion section, you may find that you need to redraft the focus of your literature review slightly to draw out those studies that are most important to your findings. You can always remove studies that are less relevant and add others that turned out to be more significant than you initially thought.

**For Postgraduates:** When doing a PhD or long research project, you will find your literature review is more like a work in progress than a finished chapter. You may write an initial draft, put it to one side, then come back to it as the focus of your project shifts, or you discover new research. You may end up re-structuring your literature review a number of times, and you will certainly need to do a thorough re-draft at the end before you submit.

Some academics explain the relationship between the literature review and the discussion section like an hour-glass: Your literature review starts broad, then narrows down to explain how previous research has influenced your specific investigation. The discussion starts by analysing your results, explaining what they mean for the outcome of your study, and ends by widening out to assess how these results might contribute to your field of research as a whole.



**Literature Review:** Starts broad and narrows to show how past research relates to your project.

**Discussion:** Starts specific by explaining what your results show in relation to your project, then widens out to say what this may mean for the field of research as a whole.

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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Study Advice and Maths Support



# Developing your literature review



## Literature Reviews 3

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

- Analysing the literature critically
- Referring back to your literature review in the discussion section

## How can I analyse critically and not just be descriptive?

Critical analysis means asking yourself whether you agree with a viewpoint and if so, why? What is it that makes you agree or disagree?

You can ensure you are analysing critically by testing out your own views against those you are reading about: What do you think about the topic? Then as you read each new study, does the evidence presented confirm your view, or does it provide a counter-argument that causes you to question your view?

Also think about the methods used to gather the evidence – are they reliable or do they have gaps or weaknesses?

**For Postgraduates:** Talk about what you have read with your supervisor. This is a good way of testing out your views, and getting feedback on the quality of your analysis and the relevance of what you have been reading. Be prepared to defend your views – this is good practice if you will be having a viva or giving conference papers.

When writing up your literature review, under each of your headings or themes, compare and contrast the differing views put forward in the relevant studies and explain how they relate to your investigation.

Your literature review needs to tell an interesting “story” which leads up to how and why you are doing your investigation. If you are writing a story which reads like one thing after another, this is likely to be descriptive. However, if your story is comparing, contrasting and evaluating the previous literature, you are on the right track. See the example below:

<p><b>Descriptive</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Summarises what other people have found without saying what these findings mean for your investigation.</li> <li>Usually a chronological list of who discovered what, and when.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Analytical</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Synthesises the work and succinctly passes judgement on the relative merits of research conducted in your field.</li> <li>Reveals limitations or recognises the possibility of taking research further, allowing you to formulate and justify your aims for your investigation.</li> </ul>
<p><b>For example:</b></p> <p>"Green (1975) discovered ....";          "In 1978, Black conducted experiments and discovered that ....";          "Later Brown (1980) illustrated this in ....."</p>	<p><b>For example:</b></p> <p>There seems to be general agreement on x, (see White 1987, Brown 1980, Black 1978, Green 1975). However, Green (1975) sees x as a consequence of y, while Black(1978) puts x and y as .... While Green's work has some limitations in that it ....., its main value lies in ...."</p>

Examples taken from University of Queensland: Writing the literature review [www.uq.edu.au/student-services/phdwriting/phlink18.html](http://www.uq.edu.au/student-services/phdwriting/phlink18.html)

## Referring back to your literature review in the discussion section

Your literature review has two main purposes:

- 1) To place your investigation in the context of previous research and justify how you have approached your investigation.
  - 2) To provide evidence to help explain the findings of your investigation
- It is this second purpose that many people forget!

When you are writing the discussion of your findings, you need to relate these back to the background literature. Do your results confirm what was found before, or challenge it? Why might this be? For example:

<b>Finding</b>	95% of the students you surveyed have problems managing their time at university.
<b>What do you think about this?</b>	I expected it to be less than that.
<b>What makes you think that?</b>	Research I read for my literature survey was putting the figure at 60-70%.
<b>What conclusions can you draw from this?</b>	There must be reasons why the figures are so different. The sample I surveyed included a large number of mature students, unlike the samples in the previous research. That was because the brief was to look at time management in a particular department which had a high intake of post-experience students.
<b>Final paragraph for Discussion section</b>	The percentage of students surveyed who experienced problems with time management was much higher at 95% than the 60% reported in Jones (2006: 33) or the 70% reported in Smith (2007a: 17). This may be due to the large number of mature students recruited to this post-experience course. Taylor (2004: 16-21) has described the additional time commitments reported by students with young families, and the impact these may have on effective management of study time. The department recognises this, offering flexible seminar times. However it may be that students would benefit from more advice in this area.

Taken from LearnHigher report writing webpages: [www.learnhigher.ac.uk/learningareas/reportwriting/writingup.htm](http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/learningareas/reportwriting/writingup.htm)