



The Writing Center

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO

DENVER | ANSCHUTZ MEDICAL CAMPUS

Writing a Literature Review

A literature review is an essay that surveys, summarizes, links together, and assesses research in a given field. It summarizes by noting the main conclusions and findings of the research; it links together works in the literature by showing how the information connects and fits into the overall academic conversation; it assesses the literature by noting gaps (missing or neglected areas of research) as well as places of weakness and contention. This handout reviews the essentials of literature review construction by discussing the major sectional elements, their purpose, how they are constructed and how they all fit together.

Typically, literature reviews are seen in two contexts: 1.) as part of a larger work (such as a thesis, dissertation or scholarly article) in order to justify your contribution to the conversation, or 2.) as a sustained independent work in order to make a major argument about a particular area of research. It is important to remember that literature reviews do not just summarize literature in a given field. Whether it is a self-contained work or part of a larger work, the literature review must make an argument about a larger academic conversation.

Each major section of a literature review should have:

- An introduction that indicates the general state of the literature on a given topic
- A summary of the major findings in that field
- A general progression from wider studies to smaller, more specifically-focused studies
- A conclusion for each major section that again notes the overall state of the research, albeit with a focus on the major synthesized conclusions, problems in the research and possible avenues of further research

1. Introductions

A literature review needs an introduction that establishes the topic and its importance:

- Begin with a sentence that demonstrates the overall importance of the topic.
- Statistics and historical background on a topic can illustrate its importance.
- In “The Well-Being of Immigrant Latino Youth: A Framework to Inform Practice,” the authors used a statistic to indicate that the growth of this population is significant:

Example: “According to the 2000 census, the Latino population living in the United States increased by 50% over 10 years, growing from 22.4 million in 1990 to 35.3 million in 2000 (Schmidley, 2001).”¹

¹ Chapman, M.V., & Perreira, K.M. (2005). The well-being of immigrant Latino youth: A framework to inform practice. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*, 86, 104-111; in Galvan, J.L. (2006).

The introduction should also narrow the topic, giving a brief overview of the literature on this topic:

- After establishing the topic's importance, narrow the topic down to what the literature review will cover.
- Depending on the paper's length, this may take a few sentences or a few paragraphs.
- Detail the specific topic, its significance and its implications:
Example: "As their presence in the United States grows [...], health and social service providers, in both traditional and new receiving communities, are working with increasing numbers of Latino clients. To better serve these clients, helping professionals will need to develop an understanding of the risk and protective factors for Latino youth [...]. Service providers will need to understand the risk and protective factors associated with migration and acculturation."

a. After narrowing the topic down, give a brief summary of the content of the paper—the thesis for the literature review. For literature reviews, the thesis statement is *the summation of the state of the literature*:

Example: "Research suggests that Latino youth face multiple threats to their well-being, including substance abuse, poor school functioning, and early adult role-taking. These risks may be particularly acute for children who immigrate later in childhood, especially during adolescence (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Despite these risks, additional research suggests that new immigrant Latino families possess certain cultural attitudes and norms that are protective against the many risks that accompany immigration."

- To make the organization of the topic clear to readers, outline the structure of the essay by indicating the major topics that will be covered, Do this either overtly or implicitly:

b. In an overt outline, a writer forecasts the exact structure of the review in the order the topics are discussed:

Example: "The results are presented and discussed under sub-headings as follows: accessibility, clinical effectiveness outcomes, patients' perspectives and experiences, workload, costs, and workforce issues."²

c. In an implicit outline, a writer notes the order of the review in the order that the topics occur, without overtly mentioning the essay's structure:

Writing literature reviews: A guide for students of the social and behavior sciences (3rd ed). Glendale: Pyrczak Publishing (pp. 132-137).

² From: Bonsall, K., & Cheater, F.M. (2008). What is the impact of advanced primary care nursing roles on patients, nurses and their colleagues? A literature review. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 45, 1090-1102; p. 1092.

Example: “Research suggests that Latino youth face multiple threats to their well-being, including substance abuse, poor school functioning, and early adult role-taking. These risks may be particularly acute for children who immigrate later in childhood, especially during adolescence.”

2. Major Sections and Sub-Sections

Major sections and sub-sections:

- Deal with specific aspects/themes within a research topic
- Start with the overall state of the literature:

Example: “Few investigations of the incidence and prevalence of specific mental health diagnoses for Latino youth exist. Most current research compares several ethnic groups on specific diagnostic categories or other measures of well-being.”
- Cite larger studies first:

Example: “In a multistage probability sample, Shrout et al. (1992) found limited differences between Puerto Rican and mainland Hispanics on a variety of diagnoses. Kleykamp and Tienda (in press) found limited well-being differences between Latino and white youth in a nationally representative sample. In a study of 3,962 ethnic minority youth receiving outpatient mental health services in San Diego, Yeh, McCabe, Hurlburt, Hough, Hazen, Culver, Garland, and Landsverk (2002) found that Latinos were more likely to receive diagnoses of adjustment disorders, anxiety disorders, and psychotic disorders compared with non-Hispanic whites.”
- Proceed to smaller, more focused studies:

Example: “In 1999, more than 25% of Latina girls reported seriously considering suicide and nearly 1 in 5 Latina girls between the ages of 12 and 21 attempted suicide one or more times in the past 12 months (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2002).”
- End with an assessment of the state and quality of the literature:

Example: “Taken together, the literature suggests that, regardless of the presence of considerable cultural strengths, Latino youth are suffering. However, the context of the struggle is missing. These studies do not take into account the immigration experience of the child and family, the role of the immigrant generation, acculturation levels, and family functioning. Without that context, practitioners and policymakers are poorly informed about which Latino youth are having difficulties and how the potential protective factors of Latino families interact with contextual risks. The potential results are inadequately informed theoretical or intervention models and inadequate clinical assessments.”

Another example from Bonsall and Cheater (2008):

Example: “In summary, research suggests that the impact of APCN roles for minor illness and some long-term conditions are similar to those of family doctors though little is known about the long-term outcomes, for example, nurses failing to diagnose serious conditions [...]. Overall the quality of evidence is variable, often derived from small studies with questionable generalisability[...]. Many studies provide inadequate details on the level of prior education and experience of nurses in their samples [...] masking the extent to which such variables are related to reported outcomes. Additionally, the different education and training requirements for APCN roles internationally limits the transferability of findings” (p. 1095).

3. Review

- Introductions state the importance of a topic, narrow it down, give the overall state of the research and establish the order of the essay.
- Sections begin with a statement about the overall state of the research on a given topic.
- These sections begin with general information first and then become more specific.
- Sections typically end by becoming more general, such as giving concluding information. The implications of the research are very important to note.
- Create a narrative in which you synthesize the information into a whole.