Literature Review

Purpose
The purpose of a literature review is to **examine and organize current literature** written on a particular topic. It is a synthesis (an examination of the bigger picture) and an analysis (BLURB) of both completed and ongoing research. Beyond summarizing individual studies, a literature review synthesizes that information by organizing it according to themes and trends. It also takes into consideration what gaps exist in the current research as well as the direction of future research. A literature review can be a stand-alone piece, or it can be an introduction to your own research paper, allowing the reader to see the current standing of your field and where your work will fit into that conversation.

- **Ask yourself:**
  - What themes have I noticed in the research that I have done?
  - How can I group the studies I’ve read through?
  - Where are there gaps in the research?
  - In what direction is the research headed from here?

As opposed to a research paper, which uses previous studies to support or examine your own argument or research, a literature review functions as an introduction to the larger academic conversation. It examines what has been done before and does not necessarily introduce a new topic. It can, however, operate as an introduction within a research paper.

Organization

**Introduction:**

- **Identify the topic** of your literature view and provide context.
  - Ex: “Renewable energy has gained more momentum in recent years as local and national governments look for sustainable alternatives to traditional fuel and power sources. The optimal form that renewable energy takes, however, is debated.”

- **Present general overarching themes** you have identified in your research and how they will be discussed in your paper.
  - Ex: “Some groups advocate for the increased use of solar and wind energy because of their low to nonexistent rates of pollution and the abundance of the resources themselves. Others promote the building and use of dams and geothermal power stations despite the potential environmental impact and expense, believing that their efficiency and reliability outweigh concern of potential damage.”

**Body:**

- **Identify patterns/themes** and organize accordingly.
  - What are the “common denominators” between reports/research studies/etc. that you’ll use as guideposts throughout your review?
    - Ex: “Several studies support the implementation of solar panels in supplementing city power demands.”
Introduce with overarching sentences, conceptual connections; conclude your observations with the “so what.”
  o What is the overall idea connecting the studies addressed in this paragraph?
  o What conclusions can be drawn in considering this particular theme or trend?

Conclusion:
  • Summarize current state of the field/research of topic.
    o Where is the field currently in its research? What current trends exist?
      ▪ Ex: “Studies continue to explore the most effective ways to implement renewable energy sources in order to reduce our carbon footprint. Currently, the majority of research is focused on the potential of solar and hydropowered energy sources, though recently several studies have been undertaken on the benefits of windpower.”
  • Discuss the direction of the research in the field and what gaps need to be filled.
    o What topics haven’t been addressed yet? What’s missing from the research that has been done?

In Conclusion
Here is a general overview of what has been discussed in this handout.
  • A literature review does not present new information, but rather synthesizes what already exists by organizing it into overarching themes and patterns.
  • The body of the paper synthesizes studies and sources by examining bigger-picture connections between them. It goes beyond summaries of research to identifying underlying themes and relationships.
  • It concludes with a general overview of the state of the field and its future direction along with what topics or gaps have yet to be discussed.

This handout has reviewed general features of literature reviews. Each discipline has its own approach to literature reviews, so for further clarification, read papers from your field to better understand the specifics that you may want to include when you write your own.