

# Literature Review

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A literature review can introduce your own research, explaining where your work will fit into the larger context of related research, or it can be a stand-alone piece that functions as an introduction to a larger scholarly conversation. A literature review synthesizes existing research and makes a claim about the state of scholarly conversation. Literature reviews differ based on the assignment, genre, or discipline. While this handout provides general principles, always tailor your work to your audience and assignment.

## Purpose

The purpose of a literature review is to **examine, organize, and synthesize current literature** written on a specific topic. A literature review requires a writer to read widely on their topic and synthesize sources by examining bigger-picture connections among them and organizing others' work according to similarities and differences. These relationships are then connected to larger ideas within the field of study. Finally, a literature review points out gaps in the current research and suggests a direction for future studies.

## Synthesizing the Research and Identifying Themes

Connecting the research from the original sources into one cohesive contextual analysis is an important goal of a literature review. **Once you have reviewed the research, ask yourself** the following questions:

- What theoretical perspectives, methodologies, themes, or outcomes have I noticed in the research I have read? What are the trends?
- How do individual studies or sources confirm or dispute others' findings? How can I group the research?
- What are the limitations of previous studies? Where are the gaps in the research?
- What are the implications of these studies? Where is the research headed from here?

## Organization

### Introduction:

- **Identify the topic** of your literature review and provide context.  
**Example:** "Hospital nurses commonly work shifts that last either 8 or 12 hours."
- **Present the overarching themes** you identified in your research and how you will discuss them.  
**Example:** "Many nurses prefer working 12 hour shifts, so they can reduce their number of workdays per week. However, some healthcare professionals worry that the costs of working such long hours could outweigh the benefits."
- **Create a guiding thesis statement or agenda** that forecasts the organization of the paper's headings and functions as a roadmap for your paper.  
**Example:** "Current studies reveal that although most nurses prefer 12-hour shifts, the nurses who work 12-hour shifts experience more fatigue, have worse overall health, and have more work-related accidents than the nurses who work 8-hour shifts, but further research investigating the effect on the quality of patient care is necessary."

## Body Sections:

In a literature review patterns or themes from the research are used to **organize the text into sections**. Keep in mind that sections within a literature review vary by assignment or research field. Refer to your assignment guidelines or literature review examples within your field to decide which sections to include.

**Example:** Based on the previously mentioned thesis statement, the literature review would include sections on preferred hours, fatigue, overall health, work-related accidents, and quality of care.

Remember that a literature review synthesizes research. Literature reviews explain overarching themes instead of listing sources one at a time.

**Example:** For the preferred hours section, if you found nine sources that say nurses prefer 12-hour shifts and two that say nurses prefer 8-hour shifts, you could note that nurses prefer 12-hour shifts, although there are some exceptions.

**Write the section.** Begin with a topic sentence that makes conceptual connections. Synthesize the studies based on overall trends. Then conclude your observations with the implications of these findings.

<p>In the last few years, prompted largely by the work of Brown and Roberts (1997), numerous articles on the effects of 12-hour shifts on nurses have appeared in various medical journals. Since this issue applies to most nurses, most experts on the subject have urged that new studies focus on how overworking decreases the quality of patient care, and how hospital administrations can approach that pressing problem by phasing out 12-hour shifts (Williams and Jones, 1972; Cooper and Green, 1980; Hill, 1997). However, as pointed out by Wilson et al. (2001), the Canadian healthcare system offers some unique perspectives on the potential benefits of 12-hour shifts: Since the 12-hour shift is optional in some provinces of Canada (such as Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia), nurses there have the freedom to choose the schedule that is best for their lifestyle, allowing both nurses and patients to reap the benefits of either shift option. To date, only one study (Young et al., 1991) has investigated the effects of the Canadian system on its nurses using a pooled data set extending across eight years (1977 to 1984) and three provinces, leaving room for additional research.</p>	Use a topic sentence to establish the overarching theme and paragraph focus.
	Point out important similarities between articles.
	Point out dissenting voices in the research.
	Explain how the different voices contribute to the current understanding.
	Draw conclusions based on the conversation and show how they fit in the big picture.

## Conclusion:

**Summarize the current state** of the literature. Where is the field currently in its research? What trends exist?

**Example:** “While studies continue to explore the costs and benefits of long nursing shifts, the majority of current research shows that 8-hour nursing shifts are safer than 12-hour nursing shifts for both the patient and the nurse.”

**Identify the gaps and make room for additional research.** of the research in the field and discuss implications and limitations of the research you studied. What topics have not been addressed? What is missing from the research or current conversation? In the conclusion of a literature review, explain why there is room for your own research or what new directions the research could take. How will this future research fill in the research gap?