What is a literature review?

Literature reviews are a way of summarizing and synthesizing the relevant information existing about a particular topic. They serve as a way to enter the scholarly conversation about a particular topic by saying “I know what’s out there, and I’m ready to contribute something new.” Think of literature reviews as an exercise in building credibility, especially if a literature review precedes an academic article or research prospectus. You are telling your reader that your work can be trusted because you clearly know your stuff.

Organize the conversation

Because literature reviews can range from 2-20 pages, depending on its purpose and audience, organization is key. Begin your literature review with an introduction that explains what topics are being examined, and a thesis statement that argues why the topic is worth reviewing. Most literature reviews are organized thematically, using headings and subheadings to transition among topics. The topics you choose to synthesize should triangulate your own research question.

Participate in the conversation

One-sided conversations are never interesting, so make sure your voice is present in your literature review. Even though you are summarizing what others have said, you control how and when these authors enter the conversation you are creating. Depending on your audience, it is often appropriate to begin and end each section with your own ideas, especially if you are also establishing how these studies are relevant or influential to your own upcoming project. Avoid only including one study or author in a particular section.

Revise!

Ask questions of your instructor or advisor with questions regarding length, number of sources, style, and audience. Your instructor or advisor might also have recommendations for places to start, as they are likely familiar with the area of literature you are studying.