Literature Review Basics
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What is a literature review?
A literature review synthesizes and analyzes previous research in a field to inform an audience and establish background knowledge. Literature reviews are most often part of a larger work, like a research article, but may also be written as their own piece to demonstrate a student’s understanding of a concept. In addition to providing the reader with background information relevant to the topic or research question, a literature review may help to identify gaps in the current body of knowledge or criticize previous research practices as a way to present potential for future research.

Why do we write literature reviews?
Literature reviews mainly serve as the section in a research article where the author presents and criticizes relevant background information and may describe the significance their research will have in the field based on this prior research. University students will most often write literature reviews as individual pieces in order to demonstrate their ability to conduct research and understand course content. They are commonly written in social and health science classes, but may be a part of any course in any field.

Narrowing down a topic
- Use the Knowledge Center or Savitt Library to access databases that can provide you with reputable literature or can help narrow your results to your field (e.g. PubMed is great for health and medical sciences)
- Make a list of keywords and phrases to use while searching for articles
- Use Boolean operators (conjunction words, such as AND, OR, and NOT, that help combine or exclude keywords during a search) to define the relationship between certain keywords (e.g. colon health AND fruit intake OR vegetable intake NOT vegetarian diet)
- Take some time to read up on the current literature; abstracts and results sections are especially helpful in identifying what is relevant to your field or topic of interest
- Take note of the questions you have while reading and consider if any of these questions have potential to serve as a question of interest for your literature review
- Take note of how many results you are getting for particular topics. Too many results and your topic may not be narrow enough; too few results and your topic may be too niche to write a comprehensive enough review
Components

Introduction
- Presents the general context of the literature, including basic background information
- Defines key terms important to the topic
- Describes why the following research should be conducted
- Includes a thesis statement or research question that will be investigated in the results and discussion sections

Methods
- Describes your process in collecting and reviewing the literature
- Details:
  - The databases you used (e.g. PubMed, Ebsco Host, etc.)
  - Any filters applied to your search (e.g. date limitations, only peer-reviewed scholarly sources, articles only available in English, etc.)
  - How you selected key words and phrases (Did any key words not elicit the results you wanted? What combinations of keywords worked best?)
  - What inclusion/exclusion criteria you used to select articles and justifies these criteria
    - Inclusion/exclusion criteria are aspects of a study that determine whether or not you will include the information in your review, such as publication date (e.g. no research published more than 10 years prior) or study population (e.g. studies concerning only women over the age of 50)

Results/Review of Literature
- Summarizes, synthesizes, and critically analyzes the literature included in the review
- Informs the reader of the current research
- Is most often broken up into subsections
  - These subsections can be organized in a number of ways, depending on the aims of the writer
- Results could be presented:
  - Chronologically: if the order in which research was conducted and discoveries were made is relevant to the purpose of the literature review
  - Thematically: if the relationships between certain topics or theories is important
  - By individual questions: if multiple conclusions need to be made to support the purpose of the literature review
  - Or any logical approach to support your purpose
Discussion

- Presents the significance of the results you discussed in the previous section
- Includes any important criticisms you made, trends you noticed, limitations of research methods, or relevant conclusions to your research question
- Describes the significance of your research to the greater body of knowledge and any thoughts you have for future research

Conclusion

- Is most often the shortest section of a literature review (usually just a paragraph or two)
- Restates the intended research question
- Sums up the reason for the research
- Describes the most significant conclusions from the results and discussion sections.

*Although this resource provides basic guidelines for a literature review, the expectations for this type of assignment may change with your professor’s preferences. If you are in doubt about how to approach a literature review, always follow up with your rubric, syllabus, professor or teaching assistant.

References

