Writing a literature review … for a course assessment

(Image courtesy of ddpavumba, 2013,)

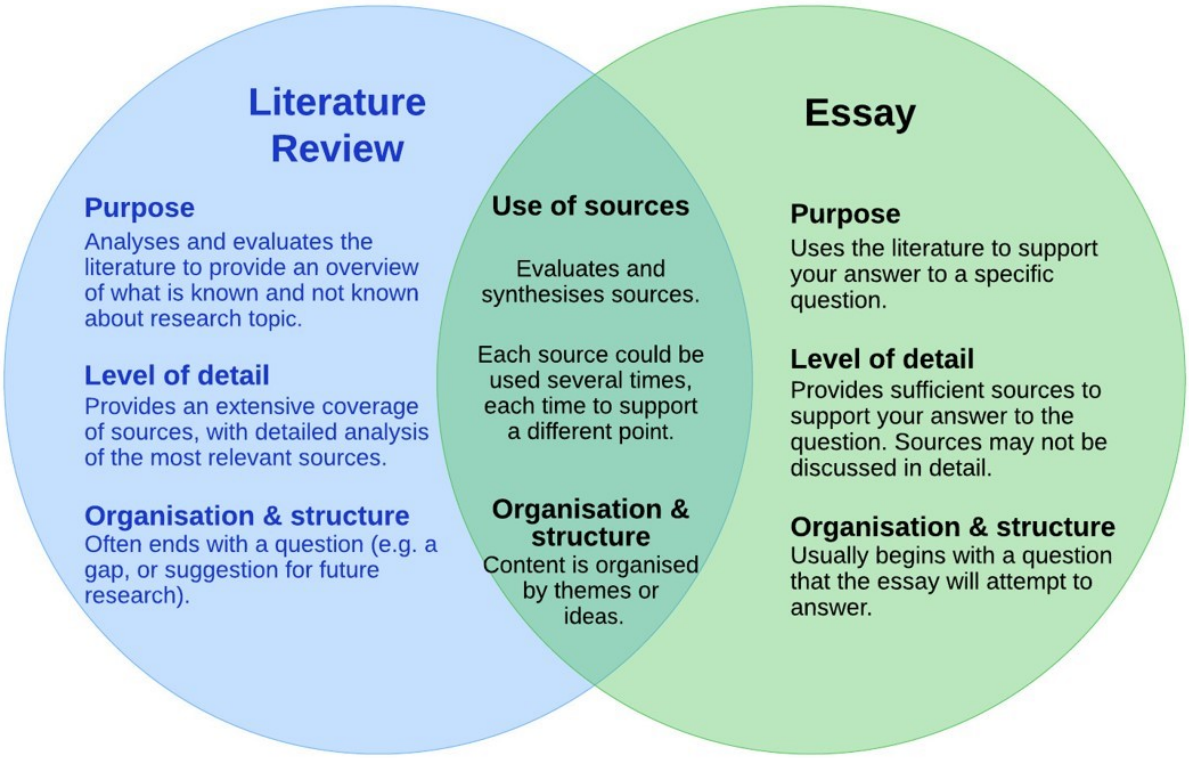
1. What is a literature review ?

A **literature review is** a critical evaluation of research related to a specific issue. You could think of it as a 'story' about what is known – and not yet known – about a topic. Your review should show:

- what researchers generally accept or agree on
- the debates, unresolved issues or gaps in knowledge about the topic
- new ideas or recommendations for future research

A literature review does not simply describe and summarise sources: it integrates (brings together) ideas and findings, evaluates (or comments on) the sources, and uses sources to help build an argument about the topic.

2. How is a literature review different from an essay?



Tip: An annotated bibliography is quite different from both a literature review and essay. Find out how to write an annotated bibliography.

3. What make a good literature review?

A literature review provides an **overview** of key sources related to the issue, but it does not simply describe and summarise those sources. A review **integrates** (brings together) ideas and findings from sources, **evaluates** (or comments on) the sources, and uses the sources to build **your own 'story'** (argument) about

To write a good literature review, you need to:

(a) Read widely

- Include a good '**coverage'** of relevant, up-to-date literature.
- Read the sources carefully to **identify key points**. The points you choose to focus on will depend on the topic and the course (e.g. the key ideas you look for in a soil science literature review will be different

Tip: A literature review includes many sources, so it is important to have a system to keep track of those sources.
You could create a spreadsheet that includes the bibliographic details (i.e. author, date etc) and your own notes on each source, or use a bibliographic software programme like EndNote.

(b) Analyse and evaluate the literature as you make notes

- **Synthesise the sources**

Synthesising means looking at the connections among the sources. You might think of synthesis as creating a model out of building bricks. Rather than having a set of individual bricks, you use those bricks to create your own structure.

(Image courtesy of Alan Chia, CC BY-SA 2.0)

As you read each source, note connections such as

⇒ common **themes**

⇒ **differences** amongst sources

⇒ **agreement and disagreement** between authors

⇒ **gaps** or unanswered questions

⇒ **logical links** of time, cause-effect etc (e.g. one study might have been a follow-up to a previous study, or tried to answer a question raised in another study)

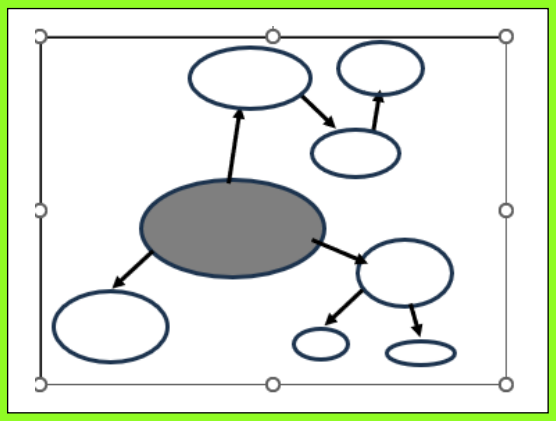
You will probably have to read sources more than once to identify all the connections.

- **Critique the sources**

Critically evaluate the sources; in other words, show your **point of view**, or opinion, about the literature. Think of 'critique' as a 'comment' on the literature and how it relates to your topic. For example, you might point out the strengths or weaknesses, explain why some sources might differ from others, or assess the implications of a source.

Tip: Use a note-making system that reminds you to make notes that include your analysis and evaluation. You could use a simple matrix or a mind/concept map to record **themes** you have identified, the sources relating to each theme, the connections amongst the themes, and your evaluation of each source. For example:

	Janssen (2019)	Hardy et al. (2010)	Walters et al. (2015)	Source 4 etc
Children's sport: society view	xxxx		xxxx	xxxx
Benefits of chn.'s sport	xxxx	xxxx		xxxx
Negative impacts of chn.'s sport			xxxx	xxxx
Theme 4 etc				



- See more detailed examples here and here

(c) Write a clear logical 'story' about the literature

After analysing, synthesising and evaluating the literature, you should have **come to a conclusion** about what is known and not known on the topic, and what further research might be needed to 'fill in the gaps'. You now need to explain that conclusion to your reader in your literature review.

To write a clear convincing 'story' or argument, you need to:

- **Highlight the 'themes' or 'ideas' you have identified**:
  - ⇒ Write **body paragraphs** that focus on 'themes', rather than on individual authors or studies.
  - ⇒ '**Tell the story**' by arranging your paragraphs in a meaningful order.

- **Write with a strong 'voice':**
  - ⇒ **Show your purpose**: Make it clear why you are including detail from the literature (e.g. to provide evidence for a point, to give your opinion on the value of a study).
  - ⇒ **Show 'who is talking'**: Distinguish your ideas from the source information (e.g. are you simply describing what the source said, or are you making a comment on it?)
  - ⇒ **Highlight your synthesis** of the sources: Use linking words and phrases.

Tip: Look at the Manchester PhraseBank for language that strengthens your voice.

This paragraph is from a literature review on how parents view sport for young children. Look at how the writer uses the literature to build a 'story', i.e. that Western societies view sport for children as beneficial, despite some research showing negative impacts.

Introduces the key focus of the paragraph. Provides evidence for point.

Synthesises sources – shows similarity.

Summarises supporting evidence for the view that sport is good for children.

Synthesises sources – shows similarity.

Introduces contrary view about value of sport for children.

Summarises evidence for one negative impact of sport (physical risk).

Uses one source as evidence

Contrasts evidence on physical risk. (Synthesises sources)

Introduces another negative impact (harmful discourse).

Uses one source as an example of supporting evidence for harmful discourse.

Concludes with the main point of the paragraph 'story'. Synthesises sources.

In Western industrialised societies, sport is generally viewed as an ideal form of physical activity for children and a counter to increasingly sedentary lifestyles that are forecast to lead to major health risks (Coakley, 2009; Janssen & LeBlanc, 2010). The view that sport is good for children is supported by scientific studies, particularly from medical and health promotion literature (for example, Biddle & Asare, 2011; Hardy et al., 2010; Holder et al, 2009; Janssen & LeBlanc, 2010; Wiersma & Fifer, 2008). However, there is a body of research challenging the idea of sport as universally good for children. The risk to children of injury, particularly from participation in collision sports, is well documented (Boufous et al., 2004). Although some suggest that children benefit from developing the ability to assess risk and learn their physical limits (e.g. Brussoni et al., 2012), increasingly the risks of injuries from collision sports are viewed as unacceptable (Quarrie et al., 2017). Non-physical risks have also been highlighted, including the exposure to potentially harmful societal discourses. Walters et al. (2015), for instance, have highlighted that children playing team sport in Aotearoa New Zealand are often encouraged to 'win at all costs'. Nevertheless, the societal discourse persists that sport is beneficial for keeping children not only active, healthy, and fit, but also in ensuring their optimal development (Coakley, 2015; Walters et al., 2015).

((Adapted from Apse, M. (2019). *Parents' discursive accounts of their children's participation in rugby league.* [Masters thesis, Lincoln University]. Research @Lincoln. https://hdl.handle.net/10182/10812)

Find out more …

- Check out Writing a literature review in a dissertation or thesis
- Ask your lecturer or a Learning Advisor for examples of literature reviews.
- Come to an Academic Success workshop or book an appointment with a Learning Advisors in Academic Success (academicsuccess@lincoln.ac.nz)