

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW IN SCIENCE AND HEALTH FIELDS

PURPOSE: a literature review gives readers background on how your topic has been studied and understood. Unlike an annotated bibliography, which provides information on one source at a time, a literature review offers a generalized picture of the patterns or trends that exist in past studies, as you understand them. Thus, a literature review should answer the following key questions for readers:

- What does the field already know about [topic]?
- What kinds of studies have been done about [topic]?
- What methods have been used, and how helpful have they turned out to be?
- What has been found?
- What kinds of information are still lacking?

PROCESS (after locating the most significant and relevant studies):

1. Read the Introduction and Discussion sections of a number of significant studies to learn
 - why the authors conducted their research
 - what questions they hoped to answer
 - what conclusions they came to
2. Read the Methods and Results sections of the same studies to learn
 - the kinds of materials used or sites or subjects observed
 - the kinds of measurements taken or observations made
 - the kinds of analyses performed
3. Construct a chart to organize your findings visually and enable you to see similarities and differences at a glance.

STRUCTURE OF A LITERATURE REVIEW:

The introduction establishes the significance of your topic and gives a brief preview of the trends you have identified.

The body contains more information about the trends, clustered to highlight similarities and differences, points of agreement and disagreement. Use topic sentences to clarify these relationships of the separate studies you have examined.

The conclusion provides an overview of what is known and what is left to explore.

LENGTH OF A LITERATURE REVIEW

PA students: For the Master's Project Community Health Education track, 2006-2007 instructions specify that the literature review should be 5-7 pages, but for the Writing Track, the literature review should be the bulk of the paper. When writing for publication, consult journal editorial policies for instructions.

All others: If you lack specific instructions about the length of a literature review, a general rule of thumb is that it should be proportionate to the length of your entire paper. If your paper is 15 pages long 2-3 pages might suffice for the literature review.