Writing a literature review

Library Service
Literature review - Purpose

The literature review is an essential step in the research process. A successful literature review will offer a coherent presentation and analysis of the existing research in your field, demonstrating:

1. Your understanding of the subject area
2. Gaps in current knowledge (that may in turn influence the direction of your research)
3. Relevant methodologies

Informing your research

The review provides important background information, relating your research to the existing research in the field. Not only does it show how your own research ideas have developed in relation to existing studies, it also clarifies the boundaries or limits of your work. The arguments you present will be seen in relation to existing thinking, which may support (you may build on other work) or refute (you may challenge other work) your ideas.

Style

The style of the review will be in accordance with the rest of your project or thesis. It will most likely require an academic, third-person style that conveys your findings in a professional and succinct manner. You will need to incorporate ideas from existing research as you would for any assignment, either through paraphrasing or quoting directly. Please ensure all sources are quoted appropriately following a Cranfield University referencing guide.

Literature review - Process

The search

Perhaps obviously, you need to gather relevant journal articles, research papers, and other disseminated research. You will be familiar with the main journal databases and these are a good place to start. You may also be looking at industry-related information to offer background into your area of research. Depending on the subject of your research, there may be lots of previous work, in which case you will need to narrow your findings to the most relevant, but if your research project is in a new area you may need to broaden your search to find relevant academic literature.
Helpful tip:

Using a reference-management system such as Mendeley will help you keep track of your sources, and you can group them by topic. It will also save time when formatting the in-text citations and the reference list.

**Literature review – The sort**

**Developing a structure**

Here are two methods to help you define the structure of your review. You may choose to use each at different stages, or choose another method from the literature available. Speak to an Information Specialist or browse the library webpages for access to books, video tutorials, and more.

1. **The Literature review grid** is a tool to categorise articles under themes as discussed above. You can create one yourself using the ‘tables’ function in Microsoft Word or you might like to use Excel. An example might look like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference for source</th>
<th>Summary</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Findings</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Critical Appraisal</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full reference</td>
<td>Main argument/ focus of research</td>
<td>Review paper/ experiment/ survey</td>
<td>Summarise the conclusions</td>
<td>What is/ are the key theme(s)?</td>
<td>Limitations of the research?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once you have identified relevant articles, you need to identify the themes that emerge as you read them. If you have a clear idea already of the chapter structure of your thesis, then you can group the ideas and themes under your existing headings. If not, then use the points you have found in your research to help form a structure for your discussion. The framework of your literature review will establish the framework of your thesis.

Once you have your themes and a basic structure, you can start to highlight relevant passages and pull out key sentences or phrases that you might want to quote directly. Don’t forget to keep a record of the publication details and page numbers to make referencing easier later on!

If using Mendeley or another reference management system, you can annotate the documents by highlighting the text and making notes.

Helpful tip: As your grid grows, you might find it useful to colour-code themes to help you pull together sources that can be grouped together.
Helpful tip: If you pull out phrases or sentences to quote directly, you might find it useful to keep these in a Word document that you could also colour-code to work with your review grid.

Don’t forget to keep the references with any quotations that you copy!

### 2. Create a structure using subheadings based on themes.
As you start to identify themes and ideas in the literature you can group them together, starting with general ideas and narrowing down to more specific concepts. This is an example:

**Research topic:** Comparison of leadership styles of men and women in ten different countries, within the banking sector.

There are two main strands to the literature here: the effect of gender on leadership style, and the effect of national culture on leadership style. Under the two main sub-headings, narrower headings can be grouped, for example:

2.1 Effect of gender on leadership style
   - 2.1.1 Female and male leaders – a comparison
     - 2.1.1.1 Cognitive abilities, social skills, and motivation
     - 2.1.1.2 Leadership style
   - 2.1.2 Structure of the organisation
     - 2.1.2.1 Formal and informal organisations
     - 2.1.2.2 Organisational impact of managers’ personal lives

2.2 Effect of national culture on leadership style
   - 2.2.1 Levels of equality
     - 2.2.1.1 Power distance
     - 2.2.1.2 Individualism and collectivism
     - 2.2.1.3 Uncertainty avoidance
   - 2.2.2 Problems of intercultural conflict
     - 2.2.2.1 Expatriate workers
     - 2.2.2.2 Multinational companies
   - 2.2.3 Manifestation in the organisation
     - 2.2.3.1 Implications for management training
     - 2.2.3.2 Implications for recruitment
     - 2.2.3.3 Implications for organisational communication
**Helpful tip:** You may find it easier to complete the review grid as you read, and then transfer the themed content into subheadings.

## Literature review – Writing up

Now, the fun part. This is where you take all those ideas and evidence from the research you have done and build a **narrative account** that situates your own project or thesis within this academic field. To do this, you need to think about the central argument of your research, and how your work builds on or challenges the existing literature. Perhaps several studies point to a conclusion that you believe you can challenge by applying a new theory or method to the research. Or perhaps several authors have conducted valuable small studies and you want to build on that by enlarging the sample size, or experimenting with different metrics. How you start to do this will depend on your own writing style, but as with reviewing the literature, there are some ‘building blocks’ that might help you.

Firstly, **define your central argument.**

Has the main focus of your research changed as a result of what you have read? Are there new angles you want to take or ideas to pursue? Having a clear research focus at the start will help you to weave the existing literature around it.

**Start with the structure.**

Using your headings or themes from the review grid or subheading structure, you can build outwards focusing on one section at a time. Quote appropriately from the literature to help make your points, remembering to cite correctly if directly quoting. An over-reliance on quotations will not demonstrate sufficient understanding; remember use your own words, synthesise different arguments and show how they relate to your own work. You need to develop an introduction, main body/argument, and conclusion.

**Move beyond formulaic writing.**

To begin with, you may be following a simple point-evidence-explanation method of constructing your argument. This can be a useful way of starting your work and getting something down on paper. To develop this, you need to synthesise (bring together) arguments and ideas from different sources, and vary the ways in which you refer to them: direct and indirect quotations, paraphrasing, etc.

**Helpful tip:** Remember to write using an academic style. This usually means writing in the third-person and in a passive voice.

**Look forward.**

Your literature review forms the background to your thesis and will be an early chapter. The conclusion should therefore summarise the findings of your literature review, clarify the position of your own research, and point forwards to the following chapters.
Literature review – Referencing

In-text citations must be used whenever you refer to someone else’s work.

If you **paraphrase**, that is, to put someone else’s ideas into your own words, you still need to credit the original idea or data. You might write According to Evans (2015), *46% of adults in the UK use Spotify*.

If you want to refer to some research **in general** but without paraphrasing or quoting, you might write *Research by Evans (2015), Butler (2002) and Robinson (2009) indicates that the use of music streaming services in the UK is in decline*.

If you want to **quote directly** from a source you need to put that into inverted commas and provide a page number. You might write “*Spotify is a popular service that is used by 46% of the UK population over the age of 18*” (Evans, 2015, p. 8).

The full references for each of these in-text citations will be in your reference or works cited list.

**Tip:** Always refer to an author’s surname when referencing

**Tip:** For a long quotation (30 words +) it is good practice to indent it, with a line space top and bottom:

Task paralysis is a phenomenon widely reported by millennials who find it difficult to ‘switch off’ from the pressures of life, and as a result are suffering from ‘burnout’. Petersen (2019) explains further:

> Burnout and the behaviors and weight that accompany it aren’t, in fact, something we can cure by going on vacation. It’s not limited to workers in acutely high-stress environments. And it’s not a temporary affliction: It’s the millennial condition. It’s our base temperature. It’s our background music. It’s the way things are. It’s our lives. (Petersen, 2019).

**NB.** There is no page number to include here as it is a web source. The full reference for the works cited list would be:


**Turnitin**

The University uses Turnitin which is software that detects plagiarism. Plagiarism is the act of using someone else’s work without acknowledgement, essentially passing it off as your own. Turnitin software is able to distinguish between properly cited quotations and instances of plagiarism, so ensure that you cite (reference) any quotations correctly. Your course tutors will give you further information about how and when to use Turnitin for your review.
Referencing guides

The University has its own referencing guides that should be followed by all students. These are available to download from the library web pages. Speak to an Information Specialist for more information.

Contacting us

https://library.cranfield.ac.uk

Barrington Library
📞 +44 (0)1793 785743
✉️ library.barrington@cranfield.ac.uk

Kings Norton Library
📞 +44 (0) 1234 754444
✉️ library@cranfield.ac.uk

Management Information and Resource Centre (MIRC)
📞 +44 (0) 1234 754440
✉️ mirc@cranfield.ac.uk

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