

The significance of the Literature Review often mystifies inexperienced researchers, and its importance may be even more difficult to grasp when the particular line of research is unusual or not easily defined; and sometimes students become confused when their research seems patterned on similar projects or replicates previous work.

raison d'être

There are certain aspects of writing a research-based essay that are often confused with the Literature Review. They may be important, and they are often introductory, but they do not constitute the Literature Review.

A Literature Review is NOT an annotated bibliography – it is NOT an undifferentiated list of research resources each with a short descriptive paragraph.

Similarly, it is not a literary survey, an overview of one author (the novels of Herman Melville) or a summary of a researcher's life and work (even if your work is biographical, you will also have secondary sources).

Background information or explanations of important concepts may be essential but they do NOT constitute the essence of a Literature Review. For example, the definition of malaria may be important to a paper tracking malaria-bearing mosquitoes, but it is not the substantive part of a Literature Review.

Finally, a Literature Review is NOT primarily an argument for the importance of what it is you are researching. It is crucial to explain what is at stake in your research, and the Literature Review may explore this aspect, but usually the Literature Review assumes that the urgency for undertaking the task has already been established in earlier, introductory parts of your research essay.

Disciplines regard Literature Reviews differently, and have various conventions for how they are researched and presented:

have fairly determined conventions for an essay reporting on research that includes a section explicitly labeled “Literature Review” or, sometimes, “Introduction” or “Background” followed by “Methodology,” “Results,” and “Discussion” or “Implications.”

have similar formats as natural sciences, although in some social sciences, particularly anthropology, there may be radical departures from the convention of an “explicit” Literature Review.

may have traditional social science formats, but they may have different ones

The conventions in natural sciences and many social sciences call for an
Literature Review. A specific chapter or section
relates the history of previous research with a rationale for the work
currently undertaken clearly in mind.

population. Replication is essential for natural and social sciences, so this is a frequent pattern.

The researcher presents a picture of current knowledge, identifying gaps or holes in the field, and argues why the current research plugs up one of the holes.

The researcher identifies various lines of argument, debates, and trends in the field, then situates the current research within that context and stakes out this study's position. This is common within literary and historical studies, but it also appears in social and natural sciences and philosophical research.

Often, there is no research directly on the subject. In this case, the researcher has to construct a context based on inference using similar or related research. This situation is often felt as having too little material – but in fact the researcher unearths inferential sources.

In this pattern, much of the field or library material remains the same, but a new analytical or theoretical framework or approach changes the way the research is conducted. Consequently, the discussion focuses on the theory involved and research that may have been done using that perspective. This is often used in literary studies.

In some circumstance, you may be required to write a Literature Review of the methodology you employ – a somewhat different mode than the context for your research. This is especially true if your methodology is unusual or a hybrid or a combination of different techniques. If this is the case, there is an

The following research tips can be summarized as

all your material but don't read any of it in depth

