Writing a Literature Review

A literature review is an essay that surveys, summarizes, links together, and assesses research in a given field. It surveys the literature by reviewing a large body of work on a subject; it summarizes by noting the main conclusions and findings of the research; it links together works in the literature by showing how the information fits into the overall academic discussion and how the information relates to one another; it assesses the literature by noting areas of weakness, expansion, and contention. This handout reviews the essentials of literature review construction by discussing the major sectional elements, their purpose, how they are constructed, and how they all fit together.

All literature review major sections should have:

- An introduction that indicates the general state of the literature on a given topic;
- A summary of the major findings in that field;
- A general progression from wider studies to smaller, more specifically-focused studies;
- A conclusion for each major section that again notes the overall state of the research, albeit with a focus on the major synthesized conclusions, problems in the research, and even possible avenues of further research.

I. Introductions

A literature review needs an introduction that:

- Establishes the topic and its importance:
  a. Begin with a sentence that demonstrates the overall importance of a particular topic.
  b. Statistics and perhaps even a little history lesson on a topic can illustrate a topic’s importance and can serve as a great introduction.
  c. In “The Well-Being of Immigrant Latino Youth: A Framework to Inform Practice” the authors wisely used a statistic to indicate that this population, specifically its population growth, is really important: “According to the 2000 census, the Latino population living in the United States increased by 50% over 10 years, growing from 22.4 million in 1990 to 35.3 million in 2000 (Schmidley, 2001).” 1

- Narrows down the topic, gives a brief overview of the literature on this topic:
  d. Follow the opening statements of a topic’s importance by narrowing the topic down to what the literature review will be about.
  e. Do this over a few sentences or over a few paragraphs, depending upon the paper’s length.

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f. Detail the specific topic, the importance of the topic, and its implications:

“As their presence in the United States grows […], health and social service providers, in both traditional and new receiving communities, are working with increasing numbers of Latino clients. To better serve these clients, helping professionals will need to develop an understanding of the risk and protective factors for Latino youth […]. Service providers will need to understand the risk and protective factors associated with migration and acculturation.”

g. After narrowing the topic down, give a brief summary of the content of the paper, or the thesis for the literature review—a lit review thesis is the summation of the state of the literature:

“Research suggests that Latino youth face multiple threats to their well-being, including substance abuse, poor school functioning, and early adult role-taking. These risks may be particularly acute for children who immigrate later in childhood, especially during adolescence (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Despite these risks, additional research suggests that new immigrant Latino families possess certain cultural attitudes and norms that are protective against the many risks that accompany immigration.”

• Outlines the structure of the remainder of the essay by indicating the major topics of the essay—this is important primarily to allow readers to understand the organization of the topic. Do this either overtly or implicitly:

h. In an overt outline, a writer notes the exact order of the review in the order that the topics occur:

“The results are presented and discussed under sub-headings as follows: accessibility, clinical effectiveness outcomes, patients’ perspectives and experiences, workload, costs, and workforce issues.”

i. In an implied outline, a writer notes the order of the review in the order that the topics occur, albeit not by overtly mentioning the essay order:

“Research suggests that Latino youth face multiple threats to their well-being, including substance abuse, poor school functioning, and early adult role-taking. These risks may be particularly acute for children who immigrate later in childhood, especially during adolescence.”

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II. Major Sections and Sub-Sections

Major sections and sub-sections:

- Deal with specific aspects/themes within a research topic

- Start with the overall state of the literature:
  
  “Few investigations of the incidence and prevalence of specific mental health diagnoses for Latino youth exist. Most current research compares several ethnic groups on specific diagnostic categories or other measures of well-being.”

- Cite larger studies first:
  
  “In a multistage probability sample, Shrout et al. (1992) found limited differences between Puerto Rican and mainland Hispanics on a variety of diagnoses. Kleykamp and Tienda (in press) found limited well-being differences between Latino and white youth in a nationally representative sample. In a study of 3,962 ethnic minority youth receiving outpatient mental health services in San Diego, Yeh, McCabe, Hurlburt, Hough, Hazen, Culver, Garland, and Landsverk (2002) found that Latinos were more likely to receive diagnoses of adjustment disorders, anxiety disorders, and psychotic disorders compared with non-Hispanic whites.”

- Proceed to smaller, more focused studies:
  
  “In 1999, more than 25% of Latina girls reported seriously considering suicide and nearly 1 in 5 Latina girls between the ages of 12 and 21 attempted suicide one or more times in the past 12 months (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2002).”

- End with an assessment of the state and quality of the literature:
  
  “Taken together, the literature suggests that, regardless of the presence of considerable cultural strengths, Latino youth are suffering. However, the context of the struggle is missing. These studies do not take into account the immigration experience of the child and family, the role of immigrant generation, acculturation levels, and family functioning. Without that context, practitioners and policymakers are poorly informed about which Latino youth are having difficulties and how the potential protective factors of Latino families interact with contextual risks. The potential results are inadequately informed theoretical or intervention models and inadequate clinical assessments.”
Another example is from Bonsall and Cheater (2008):

“In summary, research suggests that the impact of APCN roles for minor illness and some long-term conditions are similar to those of family doctors though little is known about the long-term outcomes, for example, nurses failing to diagnose serious conditions [...]. Overall the quality of evidence is variable, often derived from small studies with questionable generalisability[...]. Many studies provide inadequate details on the level of prior education and experience or nurses in their samples [...] masking the extent to which such variables are related to reported outcomes. Additionally, the different education and training requirements for APCN roles internationally limits the transferability of findings” (p. 1095).

III. General Principles

• Introductions state the importance of a topic, narrow it down, give the overall state of the research, and establish the order of the essay
• Literature sections typically begin with a statement about the overall state of the research on a given topic
• These sections begin with the most general information first and then become more specific
• Literature review sections typically end by becoming more general, such as giving concluding information, the state of the research, and any problems with the current state of the research; the implications of the research are very important to note
• Create a narrative in which you synthesize the information into a whole.