Purposes of Literature Reviews

Literature reviews tell the reader about the current state of the field by demonstrating the breadth and depth of work that has been done so far, and they identify gaps where more research/work is needed. They summarize, analyze, and assess research/knowledge about a topic. Literature reviews allow you to frame your specific interests or research question and see how related research can help inform your ideas and methods.

For example, if you are writing a literature review about ways to improve the texture of almond yogurt, and the field currently lacks literature on this specific topic, that’s okay. You can use literature about yogurt products made with dairy or soy or other almond products to inform your study, and then use your own research to fill the gap in the literature about almond yogurt.

Using Critical Thinking to Assess a Source (see the Paul and Elder Critical Thinking Framework Intellectual Standards: louisville.edu/ideastoaction/about/criticalthinking/framework)

As you review articles and publications about your topic, you can begin to assess the work and its relevance to your focus by asking these questions:

- Is this research clear? What examples do the authors provide to support it? Does their argument require more clarification or elaboration?
- Do the results make sense? Does the evidence support the conclusions?
- Do the results contradict results in other studies? Can I verify their results with my work? Do I want to? How accurate are the results of this study?
- Can the author’s methods or ideas be applied more broadly or more specifically?
• How does this research help inform my methods or research question? How does it help me or why should I include it? Does it support or contradict my hypothesis?
• What is the significance of this research/work to the broader field or to my work? Why does this matter?
• Are there issues or questions that the author ignores or does not address? What other factors could have influenced these results? Is there another perspective I (or this author) should be considering?
• Is the author being fair to other studies/works? Am I accurately depicting the ideas and conclusions in this work?

Filling a Gap
As you are reviewing the scholarship relating to your topic, ask yourself if the authors’ ideas are logical and well-supported through evidence. If they leave any questions unanswered, is there another article/author that answers them? If not, you’ve identified a gap in the research—which can help you form a more targeted research question.

Use the research you have so far to make a case for filling this gap (i.e. answering this research question). Think about your review as a funnel to narrow down to this question, and by the end of it you should be able to convince the reader that it is useful or important to fill this gap. Then you can propose how this might be done with your own hypothesis, argument, or methodology.

Three other Ways to Conceptualize a Literature Review
(see University of Hull: canvas.hull.ac.uk/courses/779/pages/writing-the-review)

As a funnel, your literature review draws reader from the broader concerns and findings of a field (the production of almond yogurt) to your specific aim: to test a method for improving this yogurt’s texture.

As a jigsaw puzzle, you treat each set of studies you’re drawing upon as equally and specifically pertinent important to your research question: a set of studies on the health benefits of almond yogurt, on consumer dissatisfaction with nondairy yogurts, and on methods that improved texture in other nut-based products all informing your project.

As a timeline, your literature review describes chronologically the important trends, developments, and challenges concerning your research topic over time, pointing toward the direction your research will take.