Anatomy of a Literature Review

1. Introduction:

What to work toward:

• Setting the reader up by providing an overview of what will be covered.
• Explaining why the topic and question matters to you and should matter to others.
• Framing the essay’s focus on the specialist conversation.

What to avoid:

• Starting by stating an argument or opinion that you aim to “prove.”
• Introducing the topic but not explaining why it matters or giving the reader an overview of what will be covered.

2. Body Paragraphs:

What to work toward:

• A draft that synthesizes information from the articles, explaining to the reader what specialists have to say about the topic and question, making connections and noting differences among what specialists have discovered or claimed about the topic and question.
• A draft that organizes information from the sources thematically or according to debates or issues within the specialist conversation.
• A draft that guides the reader, using signpost words to show connections, comparisons, and other relationships among what specialists have discovered about the topic and question.

What to avoid:

• A draft that just summarizes each of the articles, one after another, without much synthesis or focus on themes or what has been discovered.
• A draft that dumps information from all the articles but does not explain to the reader the connections.

3. Conclusion:

What to work toward:

• Explaining what readers should learn from this review of the literature (if you are writing a “state of the art” review of current thinking in a field about a particular problem) or how you are making use of this information (if your literature review is leading you toward a gap—an unresolved problem or new application—you want to identify, the basis for your own research project).
• Depending on the topic, purpose, and findings of your literature review, the conclusion might point out where future research might go or where your research project is going.

What to avoid:

• An abrupt ending with no real conclusion.
• Emphasizing your own argument about the topic or question disconnected from the story the literature tells that may lead to the gap you’ve identified or niche you want to occupy.