

A Guide to Understanding Literature Review Structure

Whether assigned as a stand-alone genre or as part of a larger project (like a thesis or proposal) literature reviews are complex. One of the many challenges students face in understanding literature reviews is how to go about organizing them.

A common but **incorrect** approach to organizing is to summarize each source independently, keeping them separate, the way an annotated bibliography might be organized. In a literature review, a thematic organization is better for synthesizing what you learned from your sources and how your sources relate to themes.

Incorrect Organization

Introduction:

*Theory/Argument/
Hypothesis*

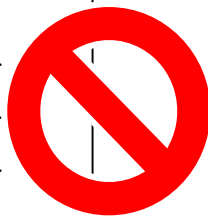
Source 1 says this...

Source 2 says this...

Source 3 says this...

Source ∞ says this...

Conclusion



Theme-Based Literature Review Organization

Introduction:

Overview of the topic/question and what our sources tell us about where knowledge on the topic currently stands

Theme 1 (Subheading)

- Source 1 + Source 3 + ...*

Theme 2 (Subheading)

- Source 1 + Source 3 + Source 4 + ...*

Theme ∞ (Subheading)

- Source 2 + Source 4 + ...*

Conclusion

* Discuss select sources as they relate to the thematic idea



Sorting Sources by Theme

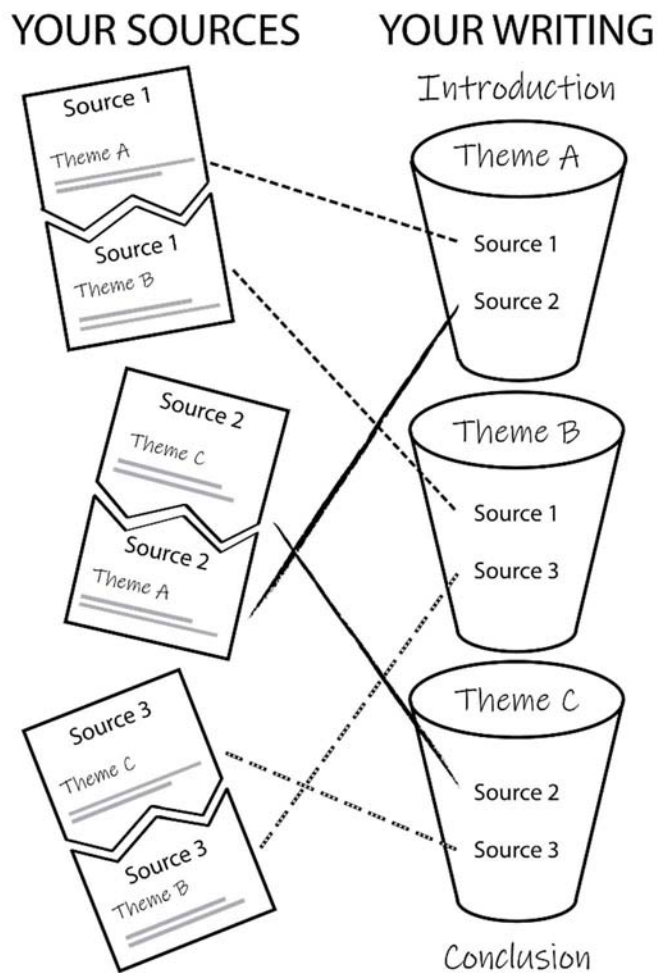
Once we've selected relevant and appropriate sources related to our topics and questions, we look for patterns or themes across our resources discussing related issues (perhaps definitions of abstract terms, methodologies, agreements and disagreement, different findings or approaches, statements or concepts), helping us to understand what each contributes to the conversation. We then break up the sources by the identified themes and rearrange what we learn from each into the thematic structure that will allow us to convey to our readers an understanding of the state of knowledge about our topic and research question. This is an important part of the intellectual work that goes into a literature review.

To better how to understand how to organize material in your literature review, ask an instructor or TA for examples of literature reviews (ideally written in your discipline or field) that you can study. Pay attention to how the writer guides readers to understand the themes and what the different sources have contributed to the ongoing conversation:

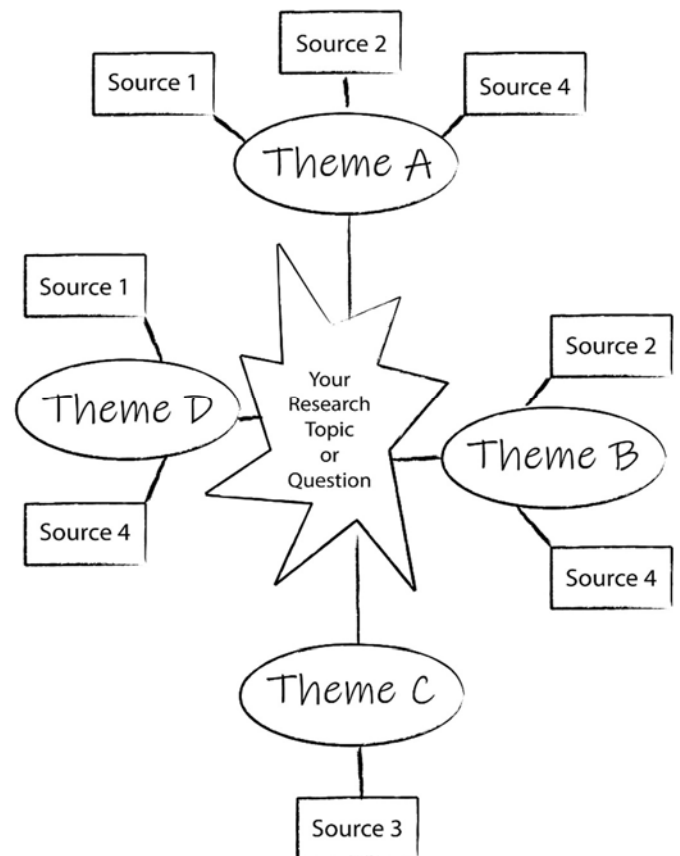
- Did they use sub-headings and/or topic sentences?
- Are there sections or paragraphs where the writer has included multiple sources?
- Where does a source appear in one part connected to a theme and again in another section connected to a different theme?

One way to represent this process of synthesis is to imagine a series of buckets, each representing a theme, into which you are sorting each source's contributions to the understanding of the topic and what is known or needs further exploration. We could have any number of sources sorted into any number of themes; it is possible that not every source will contribute to every theme you've identified and it is possible that a theme may only have one source. Following the Introduction and before the Conclusion, the theme buckets become the sections of the body of our writing and can often be used as subheadings. Within each theme's section, we discuss what each source contributes to the theme and how they connect rather than summarizing each source separately. A concept map is another way to think about this process.

Sorting Sources by Theme Bucket



Sorting of Sources Using a Mind Map



Adapted from John Cisco's article, "Teaching the Literature Review: A Practical Approach for College Instructors," published in *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, Volume 2, Issue 2 (2014)