What is a literature review?
A literature review is a piece of writing that synthesizes, shows connections between, and evaluates information or research from multiple works on a topic. Literature review formats vary by discipline. To see how they are formatted in a particular discipline, look to peer reviewed or celebrated examples of other work in that field. Literature reviews can stand alone, or they can serve as an introduction to a body of primary research.

Strategies for writing a literature review:
• Clarify your topic. This will help you decide what research you should include in your review, and what should be left out. The topic should be stated clearly in your introduction.
• When considering what research to include in your literature review, ask yourself the following questions:
  a. Does this author use defensible evidence to support their main point?
  b. Is this publication peer reviewed? What are the credentials of this author?
  c. Are the conclusions drawn by this author reasonably objective?
  d. Does the work contribute to the body of knowledge related to the subject matter?
• Use the literature review to explain why the subject you are writing about is important. Describe the historical and current trends in research around this subject, and any conflicts in the research methodology and findings published to date. Use this description to identify data gaps. If you are using a literature review to introduce your own research, use your presentation of past work to explain why your research is important.
• Look at the sources listed in the articles you read. If a few studies or authors are cited repeatedly, they probably represent foundational thinking in the subject area. Your review should also demonstrate an awareness of their work.
• When discussing the work of others, be aware of their similarities and differences. (For example, methodologies, research findings, geographical study areas, etc.)
• The amount of time you spend discussing a piece of work indicates its significance to your topic.
• A literature review is not a thesis paper. You should not attempt to make a persuasive argument. Rather, you should present and discuss the importance of relevant evidence on your topic in an objective manner.
• A literature review is not an annotated bibliography. A common mistake is to present previous studies in isolation of one another. Good literature reviews do more than simply summarize the work of others. They also show linkages between studies, identify conflicting methodology or research findings, and discuss the need for more information in relevant areas.

Why write a literature review?
A good literature review will present the most important theories, highlight gaps in information, analyze relationships, and justify further research.

This handout was created by Rachel Schattman of WID for RSENR, and is available online at http://www.uvm.edu/~wid/tips.