

# LITERATURE REVIEWS

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**Why:** Academic communities use literature reviews to identify what is known about a particular topic so that research can be expanded. Literature reviews contextualize research about a topic; they identify debates and agreements between sources and point to gaps in knowledge and possibilities for new research.

**What:** Particular features of literature reviews vary considerably according to different disciplines and their goals. Ensure that you are following your instructors' guidelines, especially in terms of the kinds and number of sources required, the citation style and the assignment length.

## Getting Started: Locating materials

Most often, literature reviews include academic sources only. Choosing the academic articles you will review for your assignment is one of the most important aspects of a successful literature review.

1) Know what an academic source is and how to find one — academic articles are found in peer reviewed journals and will have citation in them (brackets or footnotes with names and years). One possibility is to start by choosing a database dedicated to the discipline in which you are working (PsychInfo for example). Then click “peer reviewed” before searching for articles by using key words. Be careful to note from which database your articles come — sometimes when articles print, the database does not print on them and you will have to return to the computer to find the information necessary for citation.

2) Choose sources that address the same topic — this may seem self-explanatory, but the more precise your topic, the more precise you can be with your search words, and the more tightly related the articles you choose will be. One of the best ways to find materials is to choose an article that really works for your particular interests. Then, use the key words, main ideas, discussed in that article to find others that are related. It is best to get more articles than you need so that you can narrow down to the final ones you will select by ensuring that there are common key words throughout each of them.

## Getting Started: Planning for your draft

The most common mistake students tend to make when writing literature reviews is that they simply summarize information source by source rather than gathering similar ideas together and showing relationships between them. If you simply summarize information source by source, readers will have difficulty gaining an overall picture of the literature, an overview of the thinking about it, because information about similar topics and subtopics is not in the same place. Thus, a common way to prepare to write a literature review is to work from a brief summary of each of the sources to develop a “tier of abstractions.” This refers to the mapping of general topics and more specific sub-topics within each article. In order to determine how much detail you need to note, try to imagine the whole literature review in terms of how much space you will have to allot to each subtopic.

1. Use short summaries or notes from each source to identify main ideas (abstractions) from each source. It is also important to note methodologies and findings, as these, too, are very important for scholars to know as they move forward with their research.
2. Identify connections between sources (which ones discuss which sub-issues and in which ways?).
3. Devise a tier of ideas from general (main, key) to specific (sub topics, details, examples)

4. Identify sources that work with each abstraction. It is common that some sources will inform many topics for discussion within a literature review. That is why it is crucial not to report source by source, but topic by topic or theme by theme.
5. Draft an outline to identify what you will address and in what order.

**Introduction:** Your introduction (usually approx. 1/2-3/4 page) will not only present the main topic, but will also make a statement about the status of knowledge in this area of research. This usually involves reporting what is known about a topic and what is problematic about it. Knowledge deficits are crucial to literature reviews—such deficits are usually spoken about in terms of effects on particular populations, gaps in the research, and other contexts where the research could be useful. Additionally, your introduction will include a statement that outlines what issues within the broader topic (main ideas and subtopics) will be presented and in what order. Sources are often identified in this section but don't have to be.

### **Student sample: Introduction**

Internet addiction has become a widespread social issue now that technology has advanced and spread throughout the world. Internet addiction has been defined in the literature as “a psychological dependence on the internet, regardless of the type of activity once logged on” (as cited in Chou, Condron, & Belland, 2005, p. 365). **[writer contextualizes topic, defines it]** Internet addicts are seriously affected by their addiction in many ways. Ng and Weimer-Hastings (2005) found that 34% of internet addicts spend 21 to 40 hours per week on the internet, while 11% of internet addicts spend more than 40 hours per week on the internet. The amount of time that is spent on the internet by addicts has detrimental effects on their over all well-being. There have been ten reported cases of epileptic like seizures that have been induced by Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) (Yao-Chung, 2006). **[writer uses research to explain what is known about the topic—also points to problem statement (detrimental effects on well-being)]** Internet addicts are not only game addicts; there are many other sub addictions within the overarching label of ‘internet addict’. **[writer presents knowledge deficit—what needs to be looked at within the topic]**

Due to the many different sub addictions this review will first look at general definitions of addiction and internet addiction and discuss prevalence and usage rates. Secondly, it will discuss motivating factors, causes of internet addiction, profiles of an internet addict, predictive criteria that could be used in the diagnosis and prevention, negative impacts of internet addiction, assessment tools, and the treatment and prevention options available. Lastly, it will outline the five main sub-addictions of internet addiction and discuss the above topics in relation to them. **[Writer outlines subtopics and the order in which they will be addressed—note, the sub topics are *not* presented source by source]**

**Body:** In order for your reader to move through your information with ease while keeping the big picture in view, order your body paragraphs in the same way that you did in the statement about how your literature review will proceed. Order the abstractions (main ideas) from general to specific, deciding which sources have contributions to make to which concepts. You will then present more specific information from the sources, using in-text citation, to discuss the abstractions in more detail and to point out areas of agreement or debate among sources. Your body paragraphs should work to not only summarize what sources have said, but to demonstrate relationships between them. (i.e. Waterhouse (2006) and Silverstein (2007) both contend that..... While Smith (2004) and Watkins (2005) use different methods to measure.....)

As you move between body paragraphs, return to the big picture, the “map” you provided for your readers in the introductory paragraph. This works to bring them from within specific details back out to a place where they can see the whole topic.

### **Partial sample of key elements of body paragraphs**

These definitions and criteria are not accepted by all researchers in the field. Other researchers believe that internet addiction falls under the category of impulse control disorders as outlined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV* (Ross, 2000; Whang, Lee, & Chang, 2003). **[writer brings in the main abstraction (internet addiction) and makes claim about disagreement in the field]**

Johansson and Götestam (2004) equate internet addiction to gambling addiction as both involve maladaptive behavior patterns, tolerance, withdrawal, increasing use, unsuccessful efforts to cut down, and continued usage despite problems. **[writer concludes body paragraph by returning to main abstraction as she transitions into new subtopic]** An abundance of research has looked at the prevalence rates of internet addiction. **[writer includes topic sentence that indicates transition into new subtopic]**

**Conclusion:** You should conclude (about 3/4 to 1 page) by reminding readers of the main topics and sub topics by identifying points of consensus and debate that have been presented in your literature review. Identify new possibilities for knowledge making, new gaps in knowledge—what else could be looked at now that scholars know this information? Are there other contexts that need to be examined? Gaps in the research so far? You also want to include statements about what communities are best served by this knowledge—where and for whom is the information most relevant?

### Sample Conclusion

This comprehensive review of the literature has outlined the definitions of various internet addictions, and has discussed motivating factors, profiles, predictors, negative impacts, prevention, and treatment options in relation to each. **[writer summarizes main abstraction and subtopics in the same order as her paper presented them]**

#### **Limitations and further research suggestions**

The data presented in this review should be taken with caution as most of the research in this area is plagued with limitations due to sample selection methodologies; self-report data in which individuals may falsely report information about themselves to either make themselves look good or to provide the researcher with what they are looking for; high attrition rates in which participants drop out of the study part way through; and no standardized definitions of internet addiction to provide researchers with a common base from which to measure (Niemz, Griffiths, & Banyard, 2005; Suhail & Bargees, 2006). With this in mind, future research should be aware of the methodological flaws from previous research so as not to replicate these issues. Niemz, Griffiths and Banyard (2005) suggest that further research should develop a standardized definition of internet addiction so research can be accurately compared knowing that the definitions were the same. Also suggested is further study on the attributes and variables that can identify internet addicts, as well as refinement of current assessment tools (Soule, Shell, & Kleen, 2003). It has also been suggested that further research be based on longitudinal data to measure change over time and long term trends to provide a better basis for causal conclusions (Lo, Wang, & Fang, 2005).

**Citation:** While you will be citing all through your literature review, do not forget that you also need to include a References page, Bibliography, or Works Cited page, depending on the citation style required for your literature review.

#### **The Writing Centre at the University of the Fraser Valley**

- promotes and researches writing as a foundational activity connected to critical thinking and learning in a post-secondary setting,
- provides a confidential service offering writing instruction to students who wish to become effective writers in their fields of study, and
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